

Confirmation/Pentecost The Three Questions (Leo Tolstoy) (Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17)

Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC in Camden, June 9th, 2019

Today is Pentecost Sunday and we celebrate the gift and power of the Holy Spirit (God in us). We are really celebrating the presence of the divine within and around us following what we call the ascension of Christ. The Trinity pours forth the love exchanged between father/mother and Son/Christ as the Holy Spirit. Everyone and everything is in its own way imbued with the power and presence of God. In our text from the Gospel of John, Jesus refers to the Spirit as an *advocate*. This is legal language. One of the aspects of the Holy Spirit is that she defends us when negative voices seek to persuade us that we or others are not worthy of the love of God, or that we do not truly belong to each and to God. The Holy Spirit has also been called a sustainer and guide. She is that pull in us that can recognize how God is present in others and in the wider creation. She is that voice in us that seeks the common good while also calling on us to rest and listen. She helps us tune into the vision and will of God. The Holy Spirit delights in bringing people together and is therefore directly connected with the birth and sustenance of the church.

Under the loving, steadfast and creative guidance of Alisa and Joey Dowd, eight young people have studied the bible, church teachings (in the UCC these are testimonies we are asked to wrestle with but not tests of faith we are required to accept), learned about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and what it means to follow him. What better day than this to celebrate with them the acknowledged gift of the Holy Spirit in Baptism and in Confirmation (which is the act of affirming of our baptism if that occurred when we were infants). All members of the confirmation class have said that they wish to take on a life of following Christ in community. Today they will also become members of this church. What a joyous day this is, indeed!

In a little while, you will also hear a statement of faith they have put together which reflects who God is for us, with us and in us. It speaks about their desire to live a purposeful life and interconnected life. We are here to pledge our support to them and each other. In the context of what we are doing today, I would like to tell a story written and illustrated by Jon Muth

(inspired by Leo Tolstoy) about a boy named Nikolai.¹ Nikolai was asking friends for help in answering three questions that he thought could help him figure out how he should live a good and meaningful life. His friends listened and wanted to help him. One by one they took on his three questions:

- When is the best time to do things?
- Who is the most important one?
- What is the right thing to do?

His friends began to share what they thought about the first question: “When is the best time to do things?” Sonya, who was a beautiful heron bird said, “To know the best time to do things, one must plan in advance.” Gogol, the monkey had different thoughts. He had been digging through some leaves looking for some food to eat. Gogol said, “You will know when to do things if you watch and pay close attention.” Pushkin, the dog, was just starting to pay attention after a nap, rolled around and said, “You can’t pay close attention to everything yourself. You need a pack to keep watch and help you decide when to do things. For example, Gogol, a coconut is about to fall on your head!”

Nikolai had been listening carefully to his friends and decided to ask the second question: “Who is the most important one?” Sonya, the heron, got all excited and declared, “Those who are closest to heaven” and then soared into the sky. Gogol was by now rubbing his head from the coconut and determined that those who know how to heal the sick must be the most important. Pushkin, the dog, growled, “Those who make the rules.”

Nikolai took it all in and then asked his third question: “What is the right thing to do?” That was a no brainer for Sonya who said, “Flying!” “Having fun all the time,” was Gogol’s contribution. Pushkin decided to chase his friends and bark, “Fighting!” Nikolai went for walk and thought about all his friends had said. He really loved his friends and appreciated that they were trying to help him but he somehow still felt that their answers weren’t quite right or at least not the whole picture.

¹ I am drawing this story in close detail from the following children’s book: Jon Muth, *The Three Questions* (Based on a story by Leo Tolstoy), (Scholastic Press: New York) 2002.

Then Nikolai remembered Leo, the old wise turtle who lived in the mountains and decided to ask Leo for an answer to his questions. So, Nikolai hiked up into the mountains and found Leo digging a garden. Digging had become hard for Leo. Nikolai said hello and right away asked Leo for help with his questions: "When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do?" Leo listened carefully but did not answer. He just smiled and went on digging. "You must be tired," Nikolai finally said to him. "Let me help you." Leo gladly gave the shovel to Nikolai and thanked him for his help. Nikolai knew that this work was easier for him and just kept going until the rows in the garden were finished.

Just when he was finished, a heavy storm came up. The wind blew hard and rain poured down. Nikolai and Leo were on their way to Leo's house when they heard a cry for help. Nikolai got there first and found a panda bear who had fallen and been hurt by a fallen branch. They somehow got the unconscious panda into Leo's home and steadied her leg with a stick of bamboo. When the panda woke up, she was calling for her baby who was apparently still in the woods! Nikolai went outside again although the storm was still blowing wind and rain. He got quite drenched but finally found the little panda on the ground, cold and shivering. The little panda was scared but alive. It was such joy to see mother and baby panda together again. Leo wrapped Nikolai in a blanket and brought him some tea to warm up. The next morning, the sun shone again and the pandas were already feeling better. They thanked Nikolai and Leo. At the same time, Sonya, Gogol and Pushkin showed up because they had started to worry about Nikolai. Knowing that his friends cared for him made Nikolai feel really good.

However, there was a part of Nikolai that was still feeling a little disappointed. He felt that he still did not have the answers to his questions. Leo, the Turtle, looked at him and said: "But Nikolai, of course your questions have been answered!" Nikolai looked surprised. Leo explained: "If you had not stayed in the garden with me yesterday, you wouldn't have heard the panda's cries for help in the storm. Therefore, the most important time was the time you spent digging the garden. The most important one at that moment was me, and the most important thing to do was to help me with my garden. Later, when you found the injured panda, the most important time was the time you spent mending her leg and saving her child. The most important ones were the panda and her baby. And the most important thing to do

was to take care of them and make them safe. Remember then that there is only one important time, and that time is now. The most important one is always the one you are with. And the most important thing is to do good for the one who is standing at your side. For these, my dear boy, are the answers to what is most important in this world. This is why we are here.”

This story has found another way of saying, as Jesus did and the Jewish tradition from which he came, that we are called to love God and to love others as we love ourselves. Following Jesus is in the end about how we live our day to day lives in our actual encounters. Wrestling with ideas can also be life-giving, especially when they become real in our lives. I do think that the dog Pushkin has a point when he says that we need a pack to help us live faithfully. While Nikolai acts bravely and thoughtfully in our story, we need to remember that God never expects us to somehow have to save/heal the world by ourselves. God is not asking us to achieve something for God to love us more but delights when God’s love moves us to love others. There is also nothing we can do that will make God love us less than we are already loved. I believe that God delights when we live from this trust. We need each other to keep growing and maturing. Having fun together, as Gogol suggested, is also important. And it is fun to soar together at times in joy, as Sonya modeled.

May we all and may you, our newest members to be, be guided by the Holy Spirit, this advocate and sustainer, in the moments of your lives to know when the best time is to act, who is most important and what the right thing is to do. May we all remember that Christ said that in those moments when we are there for each other, we also serve him and that when we serve him more perceived boundaries fall away. We are one with all of God. May the sustaining Holy Spirit also guide you and all of us to know when it is time to rest, listen, and be renewed. We are here to walk this walk with you and delight in who you are all becoming.

All thanks and praise be to God. Amen.