



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
 Asheville, North Carolina
 12 June 2022
 Sermon: Spirit of Truth
 Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

John 16:12-15

John 16:12-15 (NRSV)

¹²“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Sometimes you can feel an absence more than anything present or tangible beside you.

- The empty chair at the table that a loved one once filled.
- The house that feels too quiet.
- The coldness of a relationship that once felt warm.
- When doubt takes the place of faith.

It seems, these days, that everywhere you turn, you see it, absence:

- Nineteen children and two adults who went to school and didn’t come home in Uvalde.
- Ten people out grocery shopping or working in Buffalo.
- Two loved ones in West Asheville.
- Countless victims of gun violence.
- The absence of *anyone* doing *anything* to protect this nation’s communities in the halls of power.

Sometimes, it is the absence of place that reverberates in a community. Many of you have read Heather McGhee’s book *The Sum of Us* as a part of GCPC’s racial

justice book series. In her second chapter, McGhee catalogues the disappearance of public pools in America during 1950s and 60s, as white communities choose to drain public pools rather than integrate them. Oak Park of Montgomery, Alabama once housed a grand community pool, surrounded by public parks, a zoo, and a community center. In 1959, the pool was drained, filled with dirt, paved over, and buried under grass seed as a way to defy federal orders to integrate public spaces. Heather McGhee writes,

I went to see Oak Park for myself in 2019 and walked the grounds looking for signs of what used to be...I asked the friendly women in the parks office where the pool had been, but nobody was quite sure. Oak Park used to be the central gathering place in town for white Montgomery; on that hot afternoon, I was one of only four or five people there. Groundskeepers outnumbered visitors. I noticed an elderly white couple sitting in a car in the parking lot. They saw me approaching and stared without welcome. I stood for a beat, smiling at the car window, before the man reluctantly rolled it down.

'Hi, sir, ma'am,' I ventured, getting nods in return. They appeared to be in their eighties. 'Are you from around here?' More nods. 'I am doing a project and was wondering if you remember when there used to be a big pool here?'

'Yes, of course,' the man replied curtly.

'Do you remember where it was?' They hesitated, and then the woman pointed straight ahead to where they'd been looking moments before. I took a sharp breath of excitement. Had I interrupted them reminiscing about the pool. Maybe they'd met there as teenagers? I leaned forward to ask more, but the man recoiled and rolled up his window.

I backed off. Where the woman had pointed was a wide, level expanse rimmed with remembering old oak trees. The only sounds were the trilling of birds and the far-off thrum of a lawn mower.¹

I find that passage striking. A community haunted by the absence of its public spaces, destroyed by a white community unwilling to be in community with their Black neighbors. An absence signifying a break, a breach in our life together,

¹ Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (New York: One World, 2021), 25-26.

repeated over and over across this country. There are scars that we fail to acknowledge; there are unspoken wounds that nonetheless continue to fester.

Our lectionary passage on this Trinity Sunday likewise weighs the contrast between absence and presence. Jesus, as part of his expanded farewell discourse to his disciples, says he is about to leave to be with the Father. “Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the [religious leaders] so I now say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come’” (13:33). Jesus will not just leave but be taken, forcefully and violently on the cross. “A little while and you will no longer see me,” (16:16a), he says.

I wonder if you have felt Jesus’s absence lately, in these days?

I talked to Lindsey, my spouse, earlier this week about an interview she heard with a teacher who was shot multiple times but survived at Uvalde.² Lindsey heard the interview as she was doing the dishes. And she told me, she just starting crying at the sink, hearing his words. She told me that, and I wondered how many times that has happened these past few weeks – people breaking down in grief in your homes, in the homes around this city, in this nation?

Sometimes you can feel an absence more than anything present or tangible beside you.

Today’s passage juxtaposes Jesus’s absence with the coming of the Spirit: “When the Spirit of truth comes, she will guide you into all the truth...and she will declare to you the things that are to come” (15:12-13).

The Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples as Jesus leaves them; the Spirit who resided in the Son will rest now with the disciples, and will speak truth to them. Not the lies, the false righteousness, the false displays of power and dominance that govern this world, for “This is the Spirit of truth,” he says, “whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees [the Spirit] nor knows [the Spirit]. You know her, because [the Spirit] abides with you, and [the Spirit] will be in you” (14:17).

The Spirit of truth, The Spirit of truth
 ‘Where is the Spirit of truth today?’ we might ask.

² The teacher’s name is Arnulfo Reyes. See Miles Cohen, “‘Cowards’: Teacher Who Survived Uvalde Shooting Slams Police Response,” ABC News, June 7, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/News/cowards-teacher-survived-uvalde-shooting-slams-police-response/story?id=85219697>

I think of Heather McGhee, former President of the equity-focused think-tank Demos, who spent a summer looking for buried public polls. I think of the search for justice that propelled her to look for and uncover what was lost, what was buried, by communities torn apart by the racism of their white leaders.

I think of the generations of Black and Brown siblings of faith, calling out for justice; LGBTQAI siblings of faith, calling out for justice. All communities pushed to the margins –pushed there too often by the church itself, calling out for justice. I think of the Spirit that propelled and propels them.

I think also of the griefs that we carry today, people crying in front of the sink, or as they dropped their kids off for the last week of school, or just as they went about their days and felt that heaviness, that heaviness, that we feel.

Grief is so much more than just absence. Tears are more than just loss. They are a proclamation of how much we love, how much we love our children and our families and our communities. That heartache that you feel in your chest, it is an expression of how much we care for justice and peace, in a world that seems filled with oppression and violence and hate.

The tears we shed, that you have shed this week, and the weeks before, the way you have hugged the people you love just a bit tighter - They are signs that it's not just absence; there's more than just god forsakenness in this world - there is something present in this void, and in our torn hearts. It is the Spirit of truth.

And I think of places like this, right here in this room, right here across the miles and the time-zones online, in the ways that we kept on being and doing community together. It's the strength that you found to bring yourself to this place, or to tune into this service. It's the way your heart opens in the middle of a hymn, or an anthem, or a prayer. It's the way you hear truth spoken through word and proclamation. That's the Spirit of truth at work in your heart and in our lives collectively.

Where is the Spirit of Truth today?

The Spirit is present when we realize that we are not alone, that we are not in competition with one another in a zero-sum game. The Spirit of truth appears when we realize just how closely we are tied together, that we rise or we fall together.

The Spirit is present when we see that the inaction, the stalemates, the unbreachable divides that we hear about every day in the halls of power are lies; the Spirit is present when we realize there is a way forward, toward communities of mutuality and care, where we stop leaving each other behind.

The Spirit is present when we remember our history, and work toward reparation, rather than ignore our wounds.

The Spirit of Truth enters into the absences of our lives, and it sustains us in our work as the people of God.

So, in the name of Creator, the Redeemer, and of the Spirit who is with us all, on this Trinity Sunday, we say, Amen.