

The Spirit of Truth and Love Reflections on John 14:15-21

*By Sophia Gilmour, Alumna
and Dr. Doug Gilmour,
Professor, Philosophy Department*

John 14:15-21 is a passage about consolation and promise in the face of fear and loss and despair. Jesus is speaking to His disciples about his imminent death but reassuring them that He will nevertheless be alive with them and close to them (that is, resurrected in their hearts), especially through the presence and comfort of the “spirit of truth” which He later refers to as the *Holy Spirit*.

While this is all *very* mysterious, we believe that everyone who has experienced the loss of a loved one, or despair over the suffering and loss of so many innocent lives in this world, faces the same mystery. In response, we see this poetic passage from the Gospel of John as a message of hope.

It begins with Jesus admonishing His disciples that “if you love me, you will keep my commands,” and the most essential commandments he shared with his followers were “to love thy God with all thy heart and all thy soul and all thy mind” and to “love thy neighbor as thyself.” We believe that the second of these commandments is essential to the first, because the *way* to love God “with all your heart, soul, and mind” is to treat others in the way you would want them to treat you: first, to love *yourself* and then to love others, *coequally*. This is, of course, known as the “golden rule,” and it is articulated with slight variations in virtually every major world religion. But consider what this means.

To love God with all your heart and mind and soul is:

- To love others as you hope they will love you.
- To honor others as you hope they will honor you.
- To respect others as you hope they will respect you.
- To listen to others as you hope they will listen to you.
- To care for others as you hope they will care for you.
- To cherish others as you hope they will cherish you.
- To delight in others as you hope they will delight in you.
- To forgive others as you hope they will forgive you.
- To bless others as you hope they will bless you.
- To find the divine in others as you hope they will find the divine in you.

If these are legitimate implications of what it means to keep the “commands” of Jesus, then it is equally clear how extraordinarily difficult (indeed, nearly impossible) this is for the limited, incomplete, needy, and self-interested creatures we are.

That is why Jesus promises throughout John to send us an “advocate” or an empowering spirit who He names “the spirit of truth” or “the Holy Spirit.” While as interpreters of scripture we struggle to make a clear distinction between the *spirit*, the *spirit of truth*, and the Greek ‘*paraclete*,’ meaning *comforter*, in this passage Jesus seems to be referring to Himself returning to us or remaining with us in a spiritual way.

Jesus’ promise, then, is that He will remain close to us even after his physical death. His spirit (which is essentially one with the *Holy Spirit*) can help us when our powers to love one another in the ways God loves us are diminished or destroyed by our experiences of suffering: of fear or despair or of loss and grief.

It is important to emphasize that, although the *symbols* of the *Holy Spirit* in art and literature are always deeply evocative, the *Holy Spirit* is not something that descends upon us in the shape of a dove or some mystical phantom-like wraith.

Rather, the *Holy Spirit* is more literally akin to the beautiful movement of God’s love as it fills us and inspires us to channel that love to others in the ways Jesus admonished us to love others in his commandments.

Thus, the *Holy Spirit*, although mysterious in the ways it moves within us, can be identified through the help of scripture and discernment. For as it is said in Galatians 5:22-23, “the fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” These are the many manifestations of the *Holy Spirit*, and Jesus’ promise is found in the *hope* that his spirit remains with us through all our greatest sufferings.

Above all, the *Holy Spirit* facilitates the experience of God’s *radical love*. We see this in the Old Testament, through God’s relationship with the Israelites, and we see it embodied in the New Testament, as the Incarnate Word, who gives guidance and comfort to the faithful and to the oppressed, and who was martyred for sharing this love in such a radical way.

Right now, in this difficult and uncertain time, we wish all of you the blessings of the *Holy Spirit* and the presence of God’s radical love and the hope that this love becomes incarnate in all of your hearts and lives.