

The truth of the triune God

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May 19, 2016

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The Gospel of John addresses a community facing trouble because of its faith in Jesus. Its original readers needed to hear a message of affirmation. No wonder Jesus says "I will not leave you orphaned" and promises the disciples peace.

It is in this context--addressing the fears of the community of faith--that Jesus pronounces the good news of the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Father and the Son will send the Spirit to the followers of Jesus. The Spirit will continue the teaching of truth and will make Jesus present in the midst of the community.

The Johannine community's anxiety about being orphaned or uprooted reminds me of the experience of the Christian community in Iraq and Syria and the Egyptian workers in Libya, all persecuted by ISIS because they are followers of Jesus. The nun that marked the houses of Christian Iraqis, the families that were forced to leave their homes, the refugee camps that these communities still occupy--all this speaks of the horror they endure.

Our efforts to support them will fall far short of undoing the violence and oppression they have experienced. It is in situations like this--where our attempts at understanding and solidarity reach their limit--that we need to rely on the work of the Paraclete, who can make Jesus present with those who are enduring such horrific things. The Spirit heals wounds and empowers people to experience the peace that Jesus has promised.

These Christian minorities are not just victims. They are also witnesses to the work of God. The Spirit that heals them also empowers them to embody the love God revealed in Jesus Christ to the world, even to the terrorists who have oppressed them. As the church worldwide seeks to support the Christian minorities in the Middle East, it should also open up its heart and mind to see what the Spirit is teaching the church through the witness and resilience of the church there.

In this week's reading, Jesus' fifth and final promise to send the Spirit, he tells the disciples that there are many things he wishes to teach them, but they are too difficult for them to bear. Then he says that the Spirit of truth will guide them into the truth. Here he emphasizes the role of the Spirit as a teacher of the truth; that is, the Spirit continues with the disciples and the church the role of Jesus who also taught them the truth.

Truth belongs to Jesus and to the Spirit. The church and the disciples are to be educated in the truth, recognizing that there are always things that are difficult to bear. As we acknowledge our limitations to perceive the truth we leave room for the Spirit to teach us and to form us as disciples of Christ.

This is crucial, because we see the church divided and polarized in contest over who holds the truth. Denominations split over doctrines and practices--over ways of articulating the truth and ways of living a truthful Christian life. We tend to think that our articulation of faith or our practices are the truth, forgetting that the truth that Jesus and the Spirit reveal to us exceeds us.

This is not to say that we cannot speak about the truth. But it is an invitation for us to pause and to think about how we relate to those who are with us in the church who think differently from us. It is an invitation to think about how the Spirit of truth will guide us in all the truth.

This truth includes the new commandment. Can we say that we know the truth if we are unable to love one another in the way Jesus loves us? The truth that we claim to hold should be measured by how much it holds us, how much it makes us love each other when we disagree.