

## **A Storytelling Commentary on John 16:12-15**

**Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD**

This story is part of Jesus' farewell discourse to the disciples. You, the storyteller, present Jesus talking to the audience as his disciples gathered around the table. So you want to create an atmosphere of intimacy, reminding the audience of the setting.

Jesus is talking to them on the evening prior to the time when he will be arrested and crucified. They are all aware that this is the last time Jesus is going to talk to them. The problem that Jesus addresses in this brief part of a much longer speech is that he has many other things to say to them but they can't absorb them now. This is more than they can bear. Jesus asks, "How is it that I will continue to communicate with you?" The way will be by the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit will come and will speak whatever the Spirit hears, that is, what it hears from Jesus. Jesus will continue to communicate to his disciples through the Holy Spirit. That is how he will continue to be made known to them in the future. This is an explicit statement of ongoing revelation: that more is to be revealed by the Holy Spirit after Jesus is gone. To paraphrase what Jesus says: "The Spirit will make known what the Spirit is told from the Father. The Spirit will declare the things that are coming in the future and will make my thoughts known to you. It will receive my words and declare them to you."

This part of Jesus' last talk with the disciples in John is one of the central sources of a major doctrinal controversy, called the filioque that has divided the church. The description of the Holy Spirit in the Nicene Creed is that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. This was the form of the Creed that was originally approved at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. Later in the context of the ongoing controversies with Arian theology, the Western Church began to add that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son. Filioque means "and the Son" in Latin.

In the eleventh century, the Western Church (Roman Catholic) added the filioque to the Nicene Creed. The Eastern Church (Orthodox) was greatly offended by this violation of the rule that had been established by an ecumenical council, that nothing would be added to the Nicene Creed without the approval of a full ecumenical council of the Eastern and the Western church. The result was a schism between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. In the eleventh century, the split became official and is with us today.

On the one hand, this has been a tragedy for the church. It is a clear example of the problems created by the development of theology as the central interpretive discipline in Christian thought. On the other hand, the ambiguity is built into John's statements, and is an important dimension of the revealing of God's character. Thus, Jesus says in 15:26: "when the Advocate, that is the Holy Spirit comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf."

Jesus says, "I will send you the Holy Spirit from the Father." Then he also says, "This is the Spirit of Truth who comes from the Father." The Eastern church has understood this to mean that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, but in our story Jesus says it will "take what is mine and declare it to you and he will guide you and will speak whatever he hears." This implies that the Holy Spirit comes from Jesus as well as from the Father.

The Western Church identifies these two elements of the farewell address as the source of the "double procession." That is, there are statements in John that support both of the theological doctrines: that the Spirit proceeds from the Father, and that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

A performance criticism approach to this problem is that Jesus says both things in John, even in one sentence, such as: "When the Paraclete comes, whom I will send to you, that is the Spirit of Truth that comes from the Father." This states both that the Holy Spirit will come from the Father and that it will come from the Father and the Son. If Jesus says both, then it is intentionally ambiguous and the ambiguity should be maintained. Both doctrinal statements are true because of the ambiguous nature of the relationship between the "persons" of the Trinity.

Thus, the Son and the Spirit are intimately related to the Father—are one with the Father. Their relationship is a relationship of mutual identification and mutual spiritual identity as well as each being a distinctive dimension of the character of God. It is one of the great ironies of the Christian religion that this statement from John, that he intended to create and sustain unity and collaboration, has become the source of division and schism. My own opinion is that this story reflects John's explicit intention to maintain the ambiguity. It is the ambiguity created by the intimate interaction of the different dimensions of God's spirit.

In our story then, the Holy Spirit will speak whatever it hears. And from whom will it hear? The Spirit will hear from the Father, just as Jesus frequently says that he speaks what he has heard from the Father.

Later Jesus says that the Spirit will "take what is mine and declare it to you," in Greek *ektuamu*. Literally translated Jesus' statement is: He will receive "what is out of me and declare it to you and he will glorify it because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you." This describes precisely what has happened. The Holy Spirit has been present with us and has continued to reveal things to us in the course of the history of interpretation of the stories and sayings of Jesus. As we've lived through these 2000 years, Jesus' prayer has been answered and the Holy Spirit has continued to reveal things to us.

The dynamic of this address is the dynamic of hope. Jesus was going away, he was going to die. His promise was that the Holy Spirit will come and be with us and will continue to make known to us the thoughts and words that he received from the Father. When has that happened?

One of the ways that it happens now is in the telling of the story. In doing this very act of telling the story, we are participating in the ongoing action of the Holy Spirit to make Jesus' words known to us. That's what you are doing in telling and interpreting the story. You are the means by which the Holy Spirit is speaking and telling stories of Jesus. That will be true for everyone who learns this story and passes it on to others. This is an action of the Holy Spirit present in the very stuff of the learning, interiorization, and passing on of these traditions about God.

Thus, both theological positions regarding "progression" describe a dimension of the story's meaning. The Spirit enables us to pass on the words that came from Jesus. And the words that Jesus speaks he has heard from the Father. So should we keep filioque in the Creed? If I have to choose, I would advocate maintaining the original form of the Nicene Creed and excising the filioque because Jesus steadily says that he has passed on what he has received from the Father. The addition adds nothing essential and is not worth the division it has caused.

But I don't have to choose. The best solution is to tell the story. The story preserves the ambiguity and clearly affirms both. To reduce the story to a propositional "either/or" is the foundational mistake. In this sense, story is truer than theology.