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**Where the Spirit Leads**

**John 16:13a**

Last month I made a journey to the Northern Neck of Virginia. One of my goals for that journey was to find the location of the Sittenbourne Parish church. When my ancestor, the Reverend Jean Bertrand, came to America in 1688, he was sent by the Bishop of London to serve the Sittenbourne Church. My research indicated that it was in the area of Tappahannock, Virginia. That is all I had to go on. My hope was that one of the libraries in that area might provide some clue to the site of this church which was founded in 1664 and was abandoned more than 200 years ago.

About three weeks before my trip, I received an unsolicited email from a man who found my renewal leave report on the internet. He was doing research on his Huguenot ancestors. One of his ancestors had been a member of the Sittenbourne Church. When he did an internet search for "Sittenbourne" my report came up as a match. He wrote to tell me how much he enjoyed reading about my research. Then he said, "By the way I have found the site of the Sittenbourne Church. It is near the Rappahannock River just off Route 17. Would you like me to send the map?"

When I left on my trip I was armed with a map that directed me to the site of the church where my ancestor served. It happened because help came at just the right time from a totally unexpected source. It is clear to me now that I could not have done it on my own.

There is a similar dynamic at work in the passages that were read for this Pentecost celebration. In both passages the Holy Spirit is working in unexpected ways to make it possible for people to do things that they could not do on their own. In the second chapter of Acts the Holy Spirit comes to the disciples at a surprising time. The Spirit helps them speak languages that they never learned and gives them the boldness to do it publicly. Then with the help of others who know these languages they learn what it was that they said. Then something else happens that they did not expect. This activity of proclaiming the gospel and helping others leads to the forming of a community of faith.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of John the nature of that community begins to emerge. Here we find the Spirit helping the disciples in another way that they do not expect. Jesus tells his followers that the Spirit will lead them into all the truth (John 16:13a). The Holy Spirit will guide them into insights that they could not discern on their own and give them the strength to live in that truth.

Sometimes the truth revealed by the Spirit is painful. In the summer of 1830 Calvin Colton made a journey to Northeast Wisconsin. He was a Yale educated Presbyterian minister who had to leave his parish in Batavia, New York because of a failing voice. He was trying to make a living as a writer. He traveled West in hopes of seeing real Indians in an unspoiled state of nature. He went to an important conference in Green Bay which brought together thousands of Indians from many different tribes.

He was enthralled by the scene which he observed along the banks of the Fox River the day before the conference. Indians were pouring onto the shore as they arrived in their canoes. They were erecting temporary lodges. Men dressed in feathers and fur came with wives, children, dogs, and pet bears. He was thrilled to be able to witness such a gathering.

Colton was especially captivated by the sight of a beautiful young Indian woman. He described her as “richly dressed, full of smiles, and really charming.” She seemed to him like a sublime vision emerging from the chaos. But then quickly as she appeared she was gone. The next morning she reappeared. Colton was struck by how much she had changed since the previous day. Her hair was disheveled. She was wrapped in a soiled and dirty blanket. She now looked depressed and pathetic as she walked along the bank of the stream. Colton turned to his friend for an explanation of what he was seeing. The friend, who had more experience with the Indians, suggested that she had probably met a white man who had introduced her to liquor and taken advantage of her (Kerry A. Trask, *Blackhawk: The Battle for the Heart of America*, pages 67-68).

The tragic truth that Colton saw in the face of this woman provided for him a new lens to begin to appreciate the genocide that threatened the native peoples that he had traveled so far to see. But it was a difficult truth to bear. It was the Spirit which gave him the power to go home and tell the story. It was the Spirit which gave him the capacity to live with the fact that his best efforts to change the policy of his government toward the Indians would not succeed. It is the Spirit which empowers us to bear the unbearable truths of our lives, too.

It is the burden of these unbearable truths that makes clear to us why we need the church. When the burden is more than we can bear the community created at Pentecost is there for us. It is the spiritual home which connects us to God’s grace and nourishes our souls. In an article in *The Wall Street Journal* last year Kevin Helliker described how this process works. Helliker is a graduate of my *alma mater*, the University of Kansas. Unlike most students at Kansas, he never attended a basketball game. This was for him an act of rebellion in a school where basketball was king. When he graduated and moved away from Kansas to live and work in another part of the country his attitude toward basketball changed. He began to follow the team and to watch the games on television whenever he could. He found it to be an anchor which kept him in touch with his roots. It became for him a powerful reminder of who he is. When he made phone calls to his family at home he discovered that they took joy in hearing him talk about how the Jayhawks were doing. He realized that these basketball references provided his family with the answer to an unspoken question. Has he remained loyal to his roots? It was his way of assuring them that he was still one of them. Helliker describes the powerful connection between basketball and home in these words:

One semester at Kansas, I sat in a room where two instructors talked to each other for 90 minutes twice a week for an entire semester about one book: “The Odyssey.” We students could neither ask questions nor take notes. Our role was to listen. What I remember hearing them say is that I should leave and seek adventures elsewhere, but never forget home. I also remember a poem they recited to us over and over, until we could recite it back:

Breathes there the man with soul so dead  
Who never to himself hath said,  
“This is my own, my native land!”  
Whose heart hath ne’er within him burned  
As home his footsteps he hath turned  
From wandering on a foreign strand!

In all the hours I sat in that class, I never heard mention of basketball. I would have guessed that these two giants of the classical world paid no attention to it. But after decades of lost contact, I recently called the surviving member of that duo, Dennis Quinn, who is still teaching at Kansas. "Basketball?" Dr. Quinn said, "Oh, yeah. I go to the games. (*The Wall Street Journal*, March 14, 2005, page h-12).

This is what the Spirit does for us. It puts us in the game that tells us who we are. It connects to the one family that nourishes us in truth.