Sermon 15 June 2025

The trip to Pilgrim from Dorchester–the nine-mile long neighborhood on Boston's south side where I live–is often full of traffic. Things can be slow on I-93 for no good reason, and the exchange at 93 & I-95 is treacherous. But this week, I saw something I'd never seen before. I went through that tunnel, what locals call The Big Dig, and I was just on the other side of it, where the on-ramp from the Tobin bridge joins the expressway, and that's when I saw it: a black panel van, with darkly tinted windows and US Government plates. The vehicle ***SCREAMED*** ICE raid. My heart leaped into my throat and my hands tightened around the steering wheel. I followed the van for miles, thinking frantically. What should I do? Should I follow it to its destination and pull out my phone and record what the men inside were going to do? *Yes!* screamed a voice in my head. *No*, said another voice. *You're a civilian, you don't know who's in that vehicle or where they're going. They could be driving to Vermont or New Hampshire for all you know, transporting people across state lines to some black site. Besides, you have Bible study in 15 minutes, you can't blow it off to behave like some reckless, untrained vigilante. Your people need you.* Should I call LUCE Massachusetts, a hotline working to provide immigrant justice with operators who speak English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Haitian Creole? *Yes!* said the first voice. *But what would I tell them,* replied the second voice*, I saw a black panel that I think is ICE but I can't prove it, No i don't know what it was doing, where it was going, or who was inside? That's a lousy tip to give to anyone, even if they are working on the side of the people.*

So what did I do? I prayed. Pilgrims, this was my prayer:
God, I pray that this black panel van would blow a tire. I pray, God, that every person who is on the list that those men are carrying would know that today is the day that someone is coming for them, and they'd be able to get out of where they are and get somewhere safe right now. I pray that you would set obstacle after obstacle in the way of these agents, and that this raid would ultimately prove fruitless. I pray sugar in their gas tank, I pray

the stomach flu upon them, and I pray tireless, competent legal counsel for everyone in their path.

I am not proud of this, Pilgrims. As soon as I uttered these words under my breath, a vision of the black panel van spinning out of control and flipping on I-93 popped into my mind. Whether or not my instincts would be sharp enough to avoid a flipping passenger van–they wouldn't–some other vehicle would smash into it. There'd be a pileup, traffic would be horrendous, multiple people would be hurt, bleeding, injured or worse, and likely wouldn't be able to afford the emergency medical care they'd need, thereby clogging the already overburdened and utterly dysfunctional medical industrial complex, and the dominoes of injustice and harm would continue to fall in all directions.

[Sigh, shake] I shook my head, cleared the vision from my mind, and put my eyes on the road and the black panel van, and I whispered a prayer of confession. I instantly felt guilty for wishing harm on the men in that vehicle. They are human, just as I am human, just as the people they were likely going to illegally detain arehuman. Though they are agents of injustice, fascism, and harm, they don't deserve broken legs and traumatic brain injuries anymore than anyone else. Right on the heels of this prayer, the scripture passage for this week came rushing back to me, like my car, windows up, AC turned off, was full of wind. And indeed it was, full of the breath of God. *Idolatry, hostility, arguments, outbursts of anger: you know this is not the fruit of the Spirit, jess,* the voice said. *You know what God is, and you know what God asks of you.*

I nodded my head, and I did the thing I do when I need someone better than me to talk me down from rage, irrationality, and fear: I called my husband. I could spend the next few minutes lauding him, which would make him a little uncomfortable, which is part of the fun, if I'm completely honest. But how great he is, though it's true, is not the point. I am fully convinced that the Holy Spirit put this man in my life as my partner. When we met, I was convinced that I was not to be partnered, which was fine because I hadn't met anyone I could stand for more than five dates. But at

every crossroads of challenge, at every juncture of struggle, of re-definition, at every invitation from God to grow, my partner is there to remind me of my faith, of my values, of the person he knows me to be and to be becoming. He is the physical manifestation of the rock that is higher than I.

He said all the things that the voice inside me, the voice advocating for love, patience, and self-control, had said: he was glad I hadn't done anything unsafe, and affirmed the part of me that knew that vigilante justice wasn't the right next move. It was right that I was scared and angry, because what is happening to our community members is unjust. Fear is what the agents of fascism want, he said, because fear is how they control us. We don't have to be afraid, he said, but we can be angry, and we can do what is right for us and for others.

I'm preaching for a second week on the Holy Spirit in celebration of Trinity Sunday, to remind us that the Holy Spirit is God. Referred to in our interpretation of scripture by the female pronoun she, the Holy Spirit is that part of God that goes everywhere and can do all things. This all sounds well and good, yes, but what exactly is the holy spirit? If you're wondering this right now, you're in good company. In the Gospel of John, while Jesus is at the Passover supper with the disciples that is Jesus' last night alive, Jesus says, "I will ask the One who sent me–that is, God the Creator–to give you another Paraclete, another Helper to be with you always–the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot accept since the world neither sees her nor recognizes her; but you can recognize the Spirit because she remains with you and will be within you…the Holy Spirit, whom Abba God will send in my name, will instruct you in everything and she will remind you of all that I told you." [John 14:16-17; 26] This word, Paraclete, used in scripture comes from the Greek word *Parakletos*, which means advocate, helper, or comforter. It was a word used to describe the person who would come stand alongside you in court and speak with and for you on your behalf. The Holy Spirit gave the early church apostles the capacity and the bravery to speak truth to power about the transformative love of Christ, the love that Christ modeled, taught, and lived. This is the Holy Spirit who gives us the words when we don't know what to say. In Paul's letter to the Romans he

writes about prayer, “We don’t know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit expresses our plea with groanings too deep for words.” The Holy Spirit is an intercessor between us and God the Creator, whom Jesus called, Abba, Father. Thank God for the Holy Spirit being able to help me pray, otherwise I’d give into my outbursts of anger and be praying ‘smiting and smoting’ on anyone who looked at me funny, much less actual agents of injustice and destruction. The Holy Spirit ministers to us when we are afraid and exhausted; She fills us with the resources we need to speak the truth of God’s love to the power of injustice and greed; and She goes to God the Creator of all things on our behalf when we cannot communicate what we want to, need to, or ought to.

The Holy Spirit is the Mystery of God, the Movement of God, the Transformational Power of God. Speaking about God this way is an invitation for us to open ourselves to the Mystery of God, which is distinctly… intangible. And that can make us frustrated, or a little scared. What does that *mean*, how do we *know*? How do we know that our desires, or our instincts, or our goals, are given to us by the Holy Spirit, or are in keepings with the Holy Spirit? In scripture, we have clarity about the difference. If our words, our thoughts, our actions lead us toward or are fueled by, anger, fear, overconsumption, selfishness, possessiveness, or arrogance, we know we are out of alignment with the Spirit of God. The hard part is being willing to ask the question and really hear the answer. Sometimes the Holy Spirit moves us toward doing things outside our comfort zone to our growth zone, which is just over the line. If we’re unaccustomed to this, our growth zone can feel like our panic zone. What if we lack the resources? What if we don’t say it right? What if we fail? It’s easy to feel the anxiety of invitation to growth and to shut down, to assume, *nope, if this was God, I’d feel better about it, and I’m too scared so this must not be God.* I know I have felt this way. But there is some wisdom in the discomfort of growth that God invites us to: every plant that grows has a protective shell, and that protective shell has to ***rupture*** in order for the plant to blossom and bear fruit. Every human being under the sound of my voice exists because a sperm cell worked without stopping to pierce the

cellular membrane of an ovum. To have your brunch omelet, you've gotta break some eggs.

So if you feel a tingle or a pull toward something, if you feel something stirring in your body, and you aren't sure if it's the Holy Spirit, ask what kind of fruit would it bear? What's the outcome? Is the outcome of your prayer or your action a blown tire, a pileup on the interstate, and profound damage? Is it amassing wealth at the cost of putting more people deeper into poverty, or protection from something that isn't really a threat? Is the outcome making something that is not your savior into your savior–like money, or education, or status, or tradition? If the answer is yes, you can believe the Holy Spirit is not in it. But if the outcome of this growth is more love, more equity in the world for those who are too often forced to do without, if it is more peace, more healing, more understanding and compassion, then you can believe that the Holy Spirit is present in this call.

Pilgrim Church, you are on a precipice. You exist in a time when some churches are clarifying for all who will listen that the power and the wealth they can experience by aligning themselves with authoritarianism is more important than the Gospel of Love given to us by Christ Jesus. Other churches are clarifying that loving our neighbors as ourselves is of chief importance during this time, and they are making hard choices to practice this. Then there are churches that are somewhere in the middle, lukewarm, that want to love others, but also want to stay comfortable, don't want to take risks in their love, don't want to stray into the growth zone because they mistake it for the panic zone. We are eight weeks into our time together–it really has been eight weeks. When I started here, Pastor Reebee told me that more than anything, this body of people needed peace & rest. Y'all have experienced loss, you are exploring defining yourselves as a house of worship in the rising tide of Christian nationalism and American fascism, and more than anything, you need someone to help you rest. I have tried to do that, while at the same time encouraging you to take note of the power and capacity of your God and of your community to let God work in you and through you to bear the fruit of the Spirit that all can share. Reebee will be back with you seven Sundays from now. In that time,

let us enjoy the gentleness that the Holy Spirit offers us, the peace and the breath of God. Let us offer our hearts to the mystery of God, so that you as a body can gain clarity about what God is inviting you to be in the shifting landscape of community and faith in Lexington, in Boston, in America. May we recognize the stirrings of Spirit in our bodies and our hearts and accede to the movement of Spirit in our lives. May we trust God to do work where we cannot, and may God show us where we can do work, so that we may step boldly, ready, into the work of God for the people of God. Amen.