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The Rest of the Story

Text: St. John 14: 8-17

Many of you may well remember the famous late radio announcer and personality, Paul Harvey. Although his politics were not to everybody's taste, and occasionally his truthfulness was in doubt, and his mannerisms could be annoying, virtually everybody loved his program *The Rest of the Story*. It usually consisted of telling at the outset some sort of hard luck story, a story of some opportunity denied or of some unscalable fence or something of that sort. Following a brief commercial break, in which it was hard to distinguish reporting and advertisement, Harvey would then come back to the original story and give it some great twist. The boy with opportunity denied might turn out to be Jackie Robinson, the sinner would turn out to be the famous saint, or the ugly duckling would turn out to be a well known swan. After surprising everybody with this twist, to conclude the segment Harvey would then always intone, "and now you know... the *rest* of the story."

Knowing the rest of the story, knowing the *whole* story is important for understanding what the story is really about. If we don't know the whole thing, or if we don't pay attention to the whole story, there is much that we miss, and much that we misunderstand. In fact, if one doesn't know the rest of the story, one usually doesn't really know the story at all.

This is something that is the case with Pentecost, which, truth be told, tends to be the great untold rest of the story of the Christian faith. For example, despite Jesus himself pointing to the sending of the Spirit as the real goal of what he came to do, Pentecost was for many years not even observed as anything special in Christian churches. Simply look at our red hymnal, which

witnesses to the sensibilities and practices of fifty and more years ago. Even though in its selection and organization of hymns that it gives short shrift to any number of important days or seasons, it goes overboard for Pentecost by completely ignoring it. Pentecost is not listed as part of the church year, even in the topical index. Since hymnals are rarely innovative, and usually reflect practices at the time they are published, you can see the problem. You don't need hymns for Pentecost, if you don't think twice about Pentecost.

With Pentecost and its story of the giving of the Holy Spirit dropped off, the narrative around which the Christian faith centers itself is truncated. It consists simply of Christ's birth, Christ's death and resurrection. Those are, of course, all absolutely crucial to Christian faith. One cannot deny that. Yet, as Jesus himself makes very clear, they are not the whole story. If they were they would constitute an interesting and powerful story of a drama enacted on earth that has shattering consequences even in the heavens, yet, even so, we would remain bystanders, outsiders, and mere observers to the story. It would have all taken place outside us, and it would not include our being affected one way or the other by it. But we are supposed to be affected. We are supposed to be drawn into the story, for if it is not about us, the story's beginning and end points are missed. That is why, as Jesus himself makes very clear, the rest of the story is so important, the rest of the story in which he not only dies and rises but sends the Spirit of truth to dwell with us and in us. Without that Spirit, we would be, as he says, orphaned and left alone. With the Spirit of truth, however, we are never separated from God. With the Spirit of truth we will know God, because he abides in us, and the Spirit will be in us. Because of the Spirit that Christ sends, we are not observers of God, but participants in God's life. Then God is in us, and we are in God through Christ, and then we have Christ's own peace. It is not until that is done, that the story is finished and completed. That is what God intended from the beginning, and any

story that doesn't include that part is not the real and whole story of the living God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thus the story, the whole story needs to be told, and we ought not to live with a truncated Christian narrative. But there is also another side to it, or rather, there is another dimension, namely, depth, that comes from knowing the rest of the story. Let me put it this way. The popularity of Paul Harvey's show undoubtedly had a lot to do with the sense of drama and curiosity Harvey gave to the telling of his stories. The final twist delighted and to give it real punch Harvey tried his best to tell the first part of the story in such a way that listeners couldn't guess the identity of even well known figures. But what I always found most interesting about it was that in the way Harvey told the story of someone's life I always came away with a different way of understanding the person. He or she wasn't just famous, and hadn't just followed out the logic of his or her talents. Instead, as a result of knowing the rest of the story I got a sense of the inside of the person, and hence of who the person really was and what he was made of. For it is one thing to become famous because you have talent or went to the right school or had the right friends, but if you have overcome something to get there, then there is a third dimension to your story. You are no cardboard cut out. Your story is a different sort of story for having that twist to it; it now has depth, for an inner life is revealed in that twist, and our inner life is our real life. So the twist gives away the person's inner life, and from it you have a sense of who the person really is.

As an example, consider someone who was not one of Harvey's subjects, but who could easily have been, namely, St. Augustine. In his autobiography the *Confessions*, Augustine lays out the story of his being first a wild child and then a talented and ambitious adult, and then his conversion to Christianity. The rest of the story, the movement from sinner to saint Harvey

would have loved. But what is really interesting about Augustine is less his choice to become Christian – in a sense, he was always hanging around the edges of the faith, anyhow; it is more a matter of how that change was a matter of an internal change. For what happened in his conversion is that he suddenly saw the world differently. That is what it means to convert. You don't just buy a new package; you see a world clearly that you may not have seen before. The change wasn't something about him or a change in his circumstances; the change was *within* him.

And what was that change? First, he was able to take the Christian story and actually imagine himself living that way. That is significant. A lot of people, even church people, can't imagine it and consequently don't live that way. Second, he also saw himself differently now. The former bad boy, ambitious boy, young man of political aspiration who thought he was writing his own story now came to recognize that the story he had been telling himself about who he was, was false. He *thought* he was the author of his own life; he *thought* he was running his own show, and would run it right up to a glorious conclusion, even though he seemed to be getting more and more unhappy. Upon his conversion, though – and this is what his conversion really consisted in -- he found out the rest of the story. It was not he who had led himself to the point of conversion – *he* had actually resisted it; it turns out it was God who was patiently guiding the way. What he had thought signified something in his life, turned out to have a twist to it, and, in the end, to be part of a very different sort of story. For example, he thought he was climbing the social and political ladder of the world of the late Roman empire by virtue of his skill with words. It turned out in the end that the Eternal Word in heaven that he had looked down on, wrote the real words of his life. It was that realization that is Augustine's conversion. It is that rest of the story that lets us see the depth of Augustine's inner life, and has made

Confessions a startling and unique work in ancient literature.

That sort of change is the twist that makes the rest of the Christian story . To talk about the giving of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost is to talk about women and men who now have a different spirit within them. They don't just look on the Christian story from the outside and then approve of it. They now see things differently – they see themselves differently, as parts of the story, as friends of God, for example, creatures in whom God wants to instill his truth and love. They see themselves at this table as God's guests who are given Christ himself as food for their souls so that they may not fail in vision or in strength. They also see the story of the world differently. Despite its dissensions, they still see it as ultimately being drawn together in one Spirit. And in this world, they especially see their neighbors differently. For they do not see competitors and dangers even in those who are dangerous – they see, as the Quakers like to say, the inner light that is in all of God's creatures.

Recently, I was given a good example of this when talking to a Quaker who had been the warden of a prison in New Jersey, and who had gotten to know several guys on death row. They were not good people, he noted. They were scumbags, quite frankly, he said, and this was not surprising. But, still he had talked to each of them and in listening to them, he said that he realized that in each one of them there once was light, and there was still the possibility of light. That possibility is the possibility of the Spirit. But just as important is to recognize that seeing that possibility is a gift of the Spirit to us. To have it is to know what it means to not be orphaned, and to be in Christ, and to have Christ in one.

His story reminded me of a passage from a novel by William Kennedy, *Ironweed*, which was written some fifteen years or so ago. Kennedy wrote:

“ In the dust and sand of a grassless vacant lot beside the Mission of Holy Redemption, a

human form lay prostrate under a lighted mission window. The sprawl of the figure arrested Francis' movement when he and Rudy saw it. Bodies in alleys, bodies in gutters, bodies anywhere, were part of this eternal landscape: a physical litany of the dead. This one belonged to a woman who seemed to be doing the dead man's float in the dust: face down, arms forward, legs spread.

"Hey." Rudy said as they stopped. "That's Sandra."

"She dead?"

"She's just drunk," Rudy said, standing up. "She can't hold it no more. She falls over."

"She'll freeze there and the dogs'll come along and eat her ass off."

"If she's drunk she can't go inside the mission," Francis said.

"That's right," said Rudy. "She comes in drunk, he kicks her right out. He hates drunk women more'n he hates us."

"Why the hell's he preachin' if he don't preach to people who need it?"

"Drunks don't need it," Rudy said. "How'd you like to preach to a room full of bums like her?"

"She a bum or just a heavy drunk?"

"She's a bum."

"She looks like a bum."

"She's been a bum all her life."

"No," said Francis. "Nobody's a bum all their life. She hada been somethin' once."

"She was a whore before she was a bum."

"And what was she before she was a whore?"

"I don't know," Rudy said. "She just talks about whorin' in Alaska. Before that I guess

she was just a little kid."

"Then that's somethin'. A little kid's somethin' that ain't a bum or a whore."

Christianity doesn't just promise redemption *from* something. It promises by the gift of the Holy Spirit to change us *into* something. It promises to let us see beyond the regrets of our own stories, and it lets us see beyond the scumbag, the whore, the bum, the jerk, the arrogant in our neighbor. It lets us see where the light once shone, and where it can shine again. It lets us see a different sort of story that can be lived, certainly for those who have not lived well, but a different sort of story for ourselves, too. To see that way, to see that we have the gift of the Spirit, is the gift of the Spirit. It is, indeed, the rest of the story.