

John 14:15-21 (NRSV)

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

Noise Cancelling Headphones

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: John 14:15-21

“This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him.”

Fred Craddock, the renowned preaching teacher, once wrote a book called *Overhearing the Gospel*. It is a thin volume. And truth be told, it could be even thinner. The best part of the book is the title. It’s not that the book is bad. It’s that the title is so good. The title tells you almost everything the book wants to say—basically that the best sermons don’t clobber you over the head, but invite you in, almost as if you were overhearing them. In the rest of the volume Craddock expands on that rather straightforward point.

I fear I may have created a similar problem with my title this morning. The title may give you all you need to know. Noise cancelling headphones. “This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him.” I’ve mixed the metaphors, but you get the idea. The world, says John, cannot apprehend the Spirit of God. However, John assures us the Spirit of God is present with us always. In my mixed metaphor, the Spirit is always there, but the world can’t see the Spirit because there’s so much background noise in the world that the Spirit of God gets swallowed up in the racket. It’s like trying to listen to beautiful music when you’re on an airplane, and the engine noise drowns out the tune. But you put on a pair of noise cancelling headphones, and the background noise subsides, and the sounds of Mozart, or Axel Rose, or Beyonce come through bright and clear.

That’s it, basically. The Spirit of God is present with us always. But the world tends not to apprehend it because there’s so much background noise. All you need is a pair of noise cancelling headphones, though, and the presence of the Spirit of God will become perfectly obvious.

That’s really all there is to it. I could stop right here. But, that just wouldn’t be right. Craddock’s publisher insisted that his book needed more than a title. And I guess a sermon does, too.

And truthfully, there are a few things the title leaves unclear. What are the background noises that keep the world from apprehending the Spirit of God? What do those noise-cancelling headphones look like, and where do you find them? How do they work? And how do we know for sure what’s background noise and what’s the Spirit of God? And why should we prefer the Spirit of God to the background noise? It’s not as simple as one might think.

Let’s pretend for a moment. You get onto an airplane, and you are a completely blank slate. You are a *tabula rasa*. You know nothing. You’ve never heard engine noise. You’ve never heard a loud ventilation system blowing above your head. You’ve never

heard a person talk or a baby cry. You've never heard music either. Wouldn't it be almost impossible to recognize which noises you were supposed to like? Would you automatically think that Mozart was music and everything else was background noise? Probably not. You would have no basis to distinguish the noises or prefer one to another. You have to be taught. Maybe your mother sang lullabies to you when you were a baby. And then you had music classes in school. Maybe you played in the band. Maybe you took music appreciation in college. Maybe you learned about music singing hymns in church, or going to parties or concerts. In a million different ways you learned about music. You experienced it. You were taught about it. And over time you came to appreciate it. You came to distinguish it from engine noise. And you came to prefer it.

My grandmother used to tell the story of when I was a toddler. She would take me in her lap and rock me in her rocking chair. And I would say to her, "Grammy, will you make that noise you call singing for me?" I was learning that singing, music was a special kind of noise, and I was learning to like it.

Isn't our faith formation like that? Isn't that how we learn about the Spirit of God, and how to recognize it and how to separate it from the background noises? And it isn't as simple as it sounds. We've all heard of the kid who drew a picture of the nativity scene. All the characters were there. The mother and child. Joseph and the animals. The angels, shepherds and the wise men. And there was a fat short guy right in the middle of everything. Queried about the additional character, the kids says, "That's Round John Virgin. You know. Round John Virgin, mother and child." I remember thinking in Sunday School that God did art in heaven, that Hark was the name of the herald angels, and that the tie that binds was a rope.

It takes time, repetition and learning. But over time the stories and the images of the Spirit of God come to deeply abide within. We experience the valley of the shadow of death in our lives, and we find comfort that though we must walk there, "thou art with me." The Christmas story becomes to us a beautiful expression of what it means for God to inhabit human flesh and be with us, Emmanuel, for God to be made of the same stuff we are. The story of the cross tears at our hearts as we ponder the magnitude of human complicity in profound evil, but then the Easter tomb comes to give us faith that surpasses the ugliness and is so glorious it far outreaches our ability to grasp it. In short we learn to see and love the Spirit of God, even if we only partially understand it.

This learning we do is a huge step. It's like learning the difference between Mozart and a jet noise, but much more complicated. It's why religious education is so important.

And one problem with religious education, especially in our mainline churches, is that we tend to think that religious education takes place about an hour a week, and that it stops after Sunday School or confirmation classes are concluded. That's a lot to expect from our noise cancelling headphones. Wearing them once a week for a handful of years asks a lot from them.

That's especially true because the background noises that would keep us from apprehending the Spirit of God are a lot more wily than Jet noise. It wouldn't take our hypothetical blank slate character very long to learn that music was preferable to engine noise and crying infants. Engine noise and crying infants are music to very few people's ears.

But the world's background noise tends to be seductive. The serpent in the garden was crafty, and it said that the apple would make them like God. The serpent said, "Here, let me be your God. You'll like me better. Come. I am the true Spirit of God."

Open the Bible to just about any place you like, and you will find one wily character or another seducing God's people, smuggling in the background noise and selling it as the Spirit of God. The greatest kings, like David, fell prey. Even Jesus' own disciples did. And surely in our own age we hear the carnival barkers offering counterfeit merchandise: greed, the market, vengeance, intolerance, and self-righteousness, saying they are the Spirit of God. And sell they do, because unlike engine noise and squalling infants, they are appealing. They promise something that looks pretty good.

My father, many years ago brought his new mother-in-law a pound of Whitman's chocolates. Gramma Lucy had never had such a thing. She ate one, then another, and then without realizing it the whole box. Needless to say, she soon felt ill. The seductive, delicious chocolates, while good in moderation, were not real food.

The Spirit of God often seems to offer less glamorous fare than its seductive rivals. And its promises aren't as easy to see, or seem far off, or hard to get to. To be honest, the Spirit of God just isn't a very good huckster; it's too honest for that. It doesn't bait and switch. It doesn't lure you in with the promise of endless chocolates. But it, also, doesn't walk away after leaving you sick in the ditch, victim to its false promises.

A couple of days ago Larry Bergstresser pointed me to a piece about the death on Monday of a great figure in the Civil Rights movement, Vincent Harding. Attached was a sermon Harding preached in 1985 called "Journeying toward the Promised Land." At one point in the sermon Harding said, "You remember the black young man who on that last night said, 'I've been to the mountain top. I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there myself, but you will get there.' That's what it means to live a life of faith, not trying to gobble everything that you can get your hands on, not saying that if I can't see it, if I can't have it myself, then I don't believe in it. It means knowing that there is a city set out there, within here, for God's people, for all people, a city that is better than anything we have known. Living in faith means knowing that this is not someplace in the sky, but that it is in the hearts and lives of the women and men who will work for it, who will seek to create it."¹

The Spirit of God just isn't very splashy. So, it takes a good pair of noise cancelling headphones to shut out those voices who say, "Gobble up everything you can get your hands on, that say, take care of yourself, that say, you can have it all, that say, don't worry those who are struggling; they're just lazy parasites."

The Spirit of God may not be splashy, but it is faithful, always here, not far off. It's in here; it's around us. It's everywhere. And all you need to hear it or recognize it in the midst of din of the world is to put on a pair of noise cancelling headphones. We sell them here. Pick up a pair and hear the beautiful tones of the Spirit of God. Let it be with you, and comfort you, and abide in you. Amen.

¹ <http://sojo.net/magazine/1985/05/company-faithful>