

LECTIO DIVINA, THE FEAST OF PENTECOST  
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In her commentary on the Gospel for the Second Sunday of Easter, Professor Sandra Schneiders reminded us that *lectio divina* refers to “reading primarily for the purpose of transformation rather than simply information.” Such reading, she noted “can be primarily literary or theological or moral or pedagogical or homiletic.”<sup>1</sup> I propose to read the text from the perspective of *political theology*.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps some may find this surprising, since the Fourth Gospel is usually characterized as poetic or considered to transcend so-called worldly concerns of politics and society; yet we do well to remember that the gospels emerged from within particular and shifting religious, cultural, and social contexts.

The gospel reading for the Feast of Pentecost narrates events that occurred on the evening after the Resurrection. Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple have reported to other disciples that they found his tomb empty, and Mary Magdalene has declared that she saw the Lord (John 20:1-18).<sup>3</sup> Wary and unsettled, the disciples meet at the usual place, making sure to lock the doors. Perhaps, they are tense and fearful of reprisals either by imperial or religious authorities. Did not Jesus predict that those who believe in him would be persecuted just as he was (Jn 16:2-3)? Suddenly, Jesus stands in their midst; he walks not only through walls and well-

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra Schneiders, “*Lectio Divina*: John 20: 19-29,” typescript, 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to Schneiders, my biblical interlocutors are Wes Howard-Brook and Richard Horsley.

<sup>3</sup> The text of the gospel for the Feast of Pentecost repeats the first of the two pericopes for which Schneiders advanced *both* an exegetical *and* theological reading. I thank Sister Cecilia Ashton for pointing this out to me.

secured doors, but through the fog of their anxiety and sorrow. He speaks a traditional Jewish greeting, “Peace be with you,” then shows them the signs of his crucifixion. Anguish and shock give way to joy.

“Peace be with you; As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall forgive are forgiven. And those whom you hold fast in love are held fast in my love” (Jn 20:21-23).<sup>4</sup>

With these words, Jesus gives his disciples more than the comfort of his bodily presence; he offers them the empowering presence of the Spirit. He sends them forth, just as the Father has sent him (Jn 20: 21). In this passage, the Johannine writer deploys the word ‘apostle’ (*apostello*) as an *action verb*, not as a noun.<sup>5</sup> To put it awkwardly, Jesus apostles the community of disciples as a whole; they are to continue his mission, to proclaim the kingdom of God. This sending forth or taking up the mission of Jesus calls the whole community of believers to humble openness and dependence upon the Spirit’s differentiated gifts or *charisms*. Moreover, these gifts are poured out *not* as personal privileges *or* as entitlements of institutional office; the Spirit’s gifts equip the community of disciples as a whole—equip the assembly of God—to further the mission of Jesus and strengthen the common good.<sup>6</sup> The Spirit knits the community of disciples together as “one body,” irrespective of former religious or cultic practice, culture or language, socio-economic or societal standing, gender or ethnicity or race (1 Cor 12:12, 13).

Yet, in carrying out the mission of Jesus, the community of disciples will face anxiety and suffering, pressure to conform to the status quo. Hence, the gift of peace to which Jesus refers

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<sup>4</sup> I am taking the liberty of using Schneiders’ translation of this text; Schneiders, “*Lectio Divina*: John 20: 19-29,” typescript, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Wes Howard-Brook, “John’s Gospel’s Call to be Reborn of God,” 98, in *The New Testament—Introducing the Way of Discipleship*, Wes Howard-Brook and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 2002). Being ‘apostled’ or being sent forth implies no institutional office, no designation of particular individuals, not even the ‘Twelve.’

<sup>6</sup> The Spirit animates each disciple’s exercise of “wisdom, knowledge, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, facility in tongues, and in interpretation of tongues” (1 Cor 12:7, 8-11).

during the Farewell discourses (John 13-17), and the peace that Jesus gives diametrically opposes the peace of the world.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives (Jn 14: 27; 20:19, 21, 26).

I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world! (16:33).

In the gospel, the peace of the world meant the *pax Romana*, founded on the “twin pillars of lies and violence.”<sup>7</sup> The man Jesus of Nazareth, the Jew whom we confess as human and divine, the Son of God, Lord and Christ, Messiah and Savior of the World was born, grew up, lived, and died in subjugation to the *pax Romana*. Not surprisingly, this peace was experienced differently by people of different stations or classes. Like other provincial and urban elites within the empire, many families, rulers, and officials operating out of the Jerusalem Temple accepted or tolerated the *pax Romana*: Some did so for the sake of survival, others for personal advancement, still others in misguided adaptation to the status quo. But to ordinary people, especially those in Galilee where Jesus grew up, the *pax Romana* and the sycophantic schemes of Herod Antipas made daily life nearly unbearable. Military intimidation and brutality, physical violence and sexual assault were coupled with expropriation and economic and tax policies that uprooted and displaced many from their ancestral lands, driving some into ruinous debt, forcing others into wage labor, starving their children, “enslaving the able-bodied, killing the infirm.”<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, these ordinary people protested, resisted, rebelled, struggled for survival, for life,

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<sup>7</sup> Howard-Brook, “Come Out, My People!” *God’s Call out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 443. The Fourth Gospel names lies and violence as tools of the devil. The Roman historian Tacitus, records these words of a Caledonian chieftain: “[The Romans are] the plunderers of the world. . . . If the enemy is rich, they are rapacious, if poor they lust for domination. Not East, not West has sated them . . . . They rob, butcher, plunder, and call it ‘empire’; and where they make desolation, they call it ‘peace,’” cited in Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 15.

for flourishing. Yet, their resistance is drenched in *pathos*: history teaches that too often the attempts of disenfranchised and marginalized peoples to wrest freedom from occupying powers ends, most often, in their deaths.

When Jesus told Pilate that his kingdom was *not* of this world (Jn 18:36), he was, in fact, distinguishing between “two types of power:”<sup>9</sup> the *power of domination* that wraps itself in the authority of divine mission to claim, to possess, to subdue; and *the power of love* that wraps itself in *agape* to yield, to relinquish, to embrace. Jesus demonstrates the meaning of a kingdom and a peace brought about through self-transcending love (Jn 3:3, 5; 13:1; 18:36; 14: 27).<sup>10</sup>

“Peace be with you . . . And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you shall forgive are forgiven. And those whom you hold fast in love are held fast in my love” (Jn 20:21-23).

The account of the descent of the Spirit as reported in the *Book of Acts* occurs on the Jewish Feast of Shavuot, which commemorates the Revelation of the Torah on Mt. Sinai.<sup>11</sup> The coming of the Spirit is dramatic and startling, commanding public attention and bringing about public consequences. The Spirit inflames, animates, even drives the disciples to proclamation and action that amazes and bewilders foreign visitors and onlookers, but that also opens their hearts and minds to the disciples’ message. The account in *Acts* revises the hostile and arrogant uniformity of the story of Babel.

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<sup>9</sup> Howard-Brook, “*Come Out, My People!*”, 444.

<sup>10</sup> Over and over Jesus opens his heart to his disciples, his friends: “Abide in me as I abide in you” (Jn 15:4); “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love,” (Jn 15:9), “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (Jn 15: 10), “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” (Jn 14:17).

<sup>11</sup> In fact, this feast ends at sundown this very evening, May 30, 2020.

By contrast, the advent of the Spirit in the Fourth Gospel is quiet, piercing fearful isolation and opening onto the joy of community. Jesus gives the gift of the Spirit through the most intimate necessity of life—breathing.

George Floyd's last words were a plea for life: "I can't breathe." He and Breonna Taylor are the most recent victims sacrificed on the altar of the *pax Americana*, established more than 400 years ago on expropriation, genocide, rape, and enslavement. On this Feast of Pentecost, as a nation, we gasp for air as rage flames in nearly every corner of our country. White racist supremacy is suffocating us, choking the very life and breath of God out of us all. We need Jesus to breathe on us, to gift us with the Spirit, to apostle us to action and service so that our brothers and sisters might breathe.

In the midst of broken hearts and burning cities, we need the Spirit's peace, presence, and guidance. This peace is neither acquiescence nor passivity in confrontation with injustice, neither defense of the status quo nor tolerance of the suffering and inequalities that social oppression has institutionalized. We need the Spirit's presence to help us to recognize our differences as gifts rather than insurmountable barriers, as opportunities for life-affirming encounter and engagement rather than occasions for exclusion and withdrawal. We need the Spirit's guidance to understand the systemic violence that ordinary black and brown children, women, and men endure each day. We need the Spirit to free us from our pretense to innocence in order that we might grapple seriously with the white racist supremacy that stifles truth and justice. We need the Spirit to breathe *on us*, breathe *with us*, and breathe *through us* so that we may *turn away from* indifference, suspicion, and hostility and *turn toward* openness, compassion, and solidarity. If we are to be authentic disciples of Jesus, we need the Spirit to empower us to walk the way of truth, to live out justice in clear and concrete ways, and to act in self-transcending love for our brothers and sisters as witnesses to the *pax Americana* of God's abiding love.