John 14:15-19 & 27
“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. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Well, friends, we've made it to Pentecost, the day when we remember the coming of God's spirit on those first disciples that fired them up to launch the Christian movement that we are a part of today. In a real sense it's the church's birthday! Pentecost is one of three major celebrations on the Christian calendar each year, Christmas and Easter of course being the other two. Clearly Pentecost is not given as much attention as Christmas and Easter, and you may be forgiven if you're unclear what this celebration is all about. But it's our loss if we don't hold on to the truth that Pentecost symbolizes: namely, that the Spirit of God is with all of us to give us guidance, strength, and comfort at every moment in our lives. God's loving care for us that was revealed at Christmas and confirmed at Easter is now manifested in the Spirit at work in our midst.

In his farewell message to his disciples in John's Gospel, Jesus promised them and us that he was not going to leave us orphaned. God's Spirit would come and abide with us. It would make its home with us, as John's Gospel puts it. So we are not left on our own as we try to live out our lives in the light of Jesus. God is so invested in us that God's Spirit is available to us at all times to support us on our life journey. Friends, that's worth claiming and holding onto—and especially now in this challenging time we are facing.

Our faith tradition speaks of God's Spirit supporting us in three ways: guidance in how we live, strength for remaining faithful to the best we know, and comfort in facing the challenges of life. And the pandemic that we're now immersed in is a time when we can use all of these forms of support.

I think most of us are well aware of our need for guidance now. Never have we had to live through such a confusing and unsettling time as this—a time when we feel as though everything in our lives has been turned upside down and many of our past markers seem in disarray. How can we find meaningful relationships with others outside our homes when so many occasions for socializing are gone and social distancing is the rule? How can we give comfort and hope to our families and friends in such a fearful and uncertain time? And how do we find it for ourselves? How can we find meaning for living when our lives feel so boxed in? Well, what kind of guidance for issues such as these can God's Spirit help us find?

I think the beginning point of finding guidance is simply facing up to our questions and being open to finding some answers. I don't believe God intentionally sent this pandemic to afflict us—but I do believe God wants to use the pandemic to get us to rethink our lives. So our openness to face the issues of this time gives God's Spirit a chance to work in us—to wake us up and move us to consider new directions and values. And as we take a fresh look at our lives, I believe God is working through our minds and intelligence to make decisions and gain new perspectives that are for our well-being.

One reality the pandemic has put in stark relief for many of us is how congested our lives have become. We've been caught up in busyness, filling our days with meetings, appointments, shopping, projects, and tasks so that often we can hardly catch our breath. No wonder we feel continually stressed. And now the pandemic comes along making a lot of this busyness impossible. We may well have time on our hands. And many of us are breathing sighs of relief. So we would do well to ask ourselves, is this busy, stressful life really how we want to live? Is that really how God intended us to live? How then can we reorder our priorities so that we can better enjoy life and tend to the things that matter most?
With the limitations put on our relating to other people, many of us have become aware of how much our friendships and social interactions and family ties contribute to our lives. My wife Jean and I are aware how much we are missing personal contact with members of our congregation. We walk a fair amount around our neighborhood, and one of the pluses of the pandemic has been how many more of our neighbors are at least saying hello to us as we walk. One couple down the block whom we hardly ever speak to dropped a note on our porch giving us their phone numbers and offering any help we might need. Now those of you who are spending more time than before with immediate family may have found that a mixed blessing, especially with schools not in session—yet at the same time you may have a new sense of how important family is to you. All this awareness may be leading us to give a higher priority to our relationships with others.

And perhaps the pandemic may be giving us time to reflect on an even deeper issue, namely, what am I making of my life? Does my life have meaning for me and for others? Am I spending my time doing things that enrich me and that express my values? What am I contributing to others and to my world? For those of us who have discretionary financial resources, how can we help those who are hurting? For example, a check to UMCOR now would make a difference to some around the world who are suffering most. That’s something I’ve done, and I commend this opportunity for your consideration.

Now so far I have been speaking of how we may want our personal lives to be different, now and after the pandemic. But we also need to consider how we want our political, economic, and social life in this country to be different. The pandemic is laying bare the failings of our public life to provide for the economic, health, and educational needs of so many people. And I’m sure God’s Spirit is nudging us to push for the kind of changes in our society that will address these needs. “Back to the old familiar” is not what we as people of faith are called to now.

As God’s Spirit works to give us guidance, it also comes to give us strength where we need it. Right now the strength most of us need is strength to endure the limitations of this time of enforced sequestering. It’s been a long haul already, and we don’t know how much longer it will go. Some seem unable to endure it and put themselves and others at risk in the process. And yes, we also need strength to follow the guidance that we are given—to make changes in our living and to follow through on the commitments we feel called to make. Change is generally the harder path, and it’s easier just to fall back into familiar patterns. But God is on the side of giving us strength when we need it. And I believe that when we want it enough and ask for it, we open ourselves to finding it. In fact, we may find we are given strength for selfless acts beyond what we had imagined. The news media lately has had numerous stories of medical personnel and first responders, and yes, ordinary people extending themselves, often at personal risk, for the well-being of others. God’s Spirit may surprise us in what we are able to do.

And finally, God’s Spirit wants to give us the gift of comfort. Jesus assures us, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. . . . Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” To not have a measure of anxiety and fear at such a time is a pretty tall order. But God’s Spirit is at work to help us in this; and it does this by reminding us that our lives are in the hands of a loving God. We are not orphaned; the God who created us continues to be with us for our well-being. So we have a frame of reference for our living that can give us confidence and comfort.

Friends, my wish for you is that, especially now, you may know the blessings of God’s Spirit working in you for guidance, strength, and comfort, and so have more of the fullness of life that is God’s will for all of us. Happy Pentecost! Amen!