I’m going to describe a person to you, who we will call John. John is not an actual person but is a composite of some characteristics we may all have or that we’ve observed in others.

John is a good person. He follows the rules and does everything he is supposed to do. He always gets to work on time. In fact, even when his wife fell down the stairs one morning and broke her leg, John called a neighbor to help her and made it to work on time.

John goes to church every week because he knows that is the right thing to do. Often when he goes to church, he sees many people hanging around the parking lot of the church and sometimes seeking shelter under the awning. These people smell funny and are unkempt and probably homeless. They irritate John because he has to go around them to get to church on time. John wishes these people would find someplace else to go and not bother good people like him when they try to go to church.

John also serves on the vestry. At this month’s meeting, the vestry talked about the importance of the church being more open to people in the community. John really liked the idea of opening up the church to the knitting circle, but he is opposed to allowing homeless people to sleep on the floor of the Undercroft on winter nights. They’ll end up bringing their smells into the church. They will steal anything that isn’t nailed down. The building will become unsafe for respectable folks. The presence of the homeless will detract from the quiet holiness of this space, especially if they sleep there on Saturday nights. Imagine trying to do church with all of them around. They don’t belong here.

Discerning good and evil – or to use the language of our lections – discerning the Holy Spirit from evil spirits – isn’t always cut and dry. We are taught to be responsible and follow the rules. And being a responsible member of society (both secular and religious) is often a good thing.

But the tricky part is that isn’t always true. The rules seem to change. Moral choices aren’t as black and white as they seem. Let’s take John, for instance. Sometimes he becomes a slave to the rules rather than one who chooses to follow them. We don’t know John’s circumstances, of course, so we can’t judge him. But his wife falling and breaking her leg in the morning certainly presents John with a moral dilemma. Does he go to work on time as he’s been taught is essential, or does he stay to comfort her? If he stays with her, he’s broken one of the rules that have been ingrained in him. Where is the Holy Spirit in this situation?

Let’s also think about John, the churchgoer. He’s obviously learned the habit of prompt and regular church attendance early in life and sticks to it. Trivial problems or obstacles, or excuses don’t prevent him from coming to church on time. In many ways, that’s a good thing. The homeless people who hang out around the church do present an obstacle because John has to push his way through them to get to church. Where is the Holy Spirit in this situation?

Finally, let’s look at the proposal the vestry is considering to let homeless people sleep in the Undercroft on winter nights, including Saturdays. They will make attending church more difficult for the regulars. They likely will smell, and the church will have to do more cleaning. They could be an obstacle to following the “rules.” Where is the Holy Spirit in this situation?

We’ve all faced situations similar to those John is facing. Although I’d like to think John's concerns are more evident than some, I must mention an experience I had as a seminarian. I once preached a sermon similar to this one, and the parish’s lay committee told me that the sermon wasn’t relevant to them because, as a church, we’re not supposed to associate with ***those*** people. Churches and good Christians do lose their way sometimes. As Christians, we sometimes get derailed even in scenarios that later seemed obvious. And, of course, we encounter plenty of scenarios with even more difficult dilemmas.

We have learned “good” behaviors and these obstacles come up that threaten that. We should, of course, reject many obstacles to learned “good” behaviors; for example, if John were asked to stay out all night drinking and gambling so that he couldn’t attend church. But with some of these “obstacles,” the Holy Spirit might just be calling us to take an unexpected action.

The Holy Spirit can come to us in disturbing forms. Like Jews in the time of Samuel and Jesus, we live in troubling times where discerning between good and evil isn’t always clear-cut. When we’re confronted with something that seems to go against the “rules, I invite us to pray and discern before we dismiss it. I invite us to look at what would be compassionate in all these situations. Because if we take the compassionate step, we will find ourselves in the crowd devoted to Jesus instead of the “legitimate” authorities and family that Jesus rejects.

Where compassion is, the Holy Spirit is. And, where the Holy Spirit is, we should be also.