

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for Pentecost, May 27, 2012  
Lessons: Isaiah 61:1-4 and Romans 8:14-21,26,27

## LIVING IN CONVERSATION WITH GOD

Pentecost celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit to Jesus' disciples. The Spirit is not impersonal force but living Person, and so we can never possess, control, or use the Spirit of God. Our connection with God through the Spirit is relational, not magical; it flows from love, not power. We do not, by religious means or any other means, tap into the Spirit of God for our purposes. Rather, the Spirit works unseen within us and among us to produce the qualities of human interaction God wants for us, which the apostle Paul names as the "fruit of the Spirit": "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Notice they are all relational; not one of them sets us above other people.

But how can we speak of the Spirit as a distinct Person? I have been asked why we need to believe in the Holy Spirit. What is the difference between saying the Spirit is within us and among us and just saying God is within us and among us? There is a difference, and it really does matter. If I say God is within me, I will be tempted to listen only to myself for divine guidance and truth, and I may be tempted further to deify myself as though my subconscious mind were secretly divine. Many people have been seized by the notion that they can find God within themselves, but many people as well have lived and died without finding in themselves any connection with God at all. The disconnected self has become the nature of the postmodern human being, and the disconnected self is both lonely and dangerous to self or others.

It has been said wisely that evil is lack of empathy. The disconnected person does not feel the pains and distresses of other people and so shares neither their griefs nor their joys. The disconnected person dismisses others' sufferings as unimportant or even enjoys them. Think about it, please. What harm can we do willingly if we empathize with the person we would hurt? Of course, we make mistakes or act carelessly and thoughtlessly at times, and so we do hurt friends and people we love. Fear, anger, and shame can make us act hurtfully, but we later feel ashamed of ourselves. The truly disconnected person is shameless about not caring that others suffer. Evil flows from lack of empathy, lack of feeling with and for the person in distress, lack of ability or even desire to share in the griefs or joys of others.

The Bible insists that human life is relational. "It is not good for the human to be alone"; we are not made to be disconnected from other people. What the Bible reveals to us

about the rightful nature of human life is that we are created for relationship with the unseen God who loves us and longs for our response. The hidden source of our alienation from each other is our disconnectedness from God, but we cannot identify our deepest problem until we learn that God loves us, cares what we are going through in life, and has better hopes for us than we have found for ourselves. How can we know that hidden truth unless someone tells us, and how can we entrust ourselves to it unless we are somehow moved to believe it? Moving us to believe it is the work of the Spirit of God whose great mission is restore and maintain our connectedness with God and with each other.

The living God is not to be found within me. God is outside me. God is Other and confronts me as the One who made me, loves me, and gives me life but, also, as the One who loves other people from whom I am disconnected. Relationship with God requires and creates empathy with other people and justice within the human community.

But if God is completely Other distinct from me, how can God know my distresses, griefs, or joys? I cannot relate to another person I do not understand at all, a person with whom I have nothing in common and so no opening for conversation. It would be like talking to a stone or, as we say sometimes, to a brick wall. So how can God be accessible to us so that praying is not like speaking our needs and concerns to a brick wall or an empty sky? What does the Creator of the universe know about, say, the conflicted, mixed up emotions this day and its congregational meeting stir in me? How can God possibly empathize with our human feelings of regret, gratitude, gain, and loss? Can God feel embarrassment, guilt, or anticipation?

The living human answer to such questions is Jesus. In him, God has experienced life as one of us, with all our human limitations, bodily comforts and discomforts, and our vulnerabilities to life and to death. In him, God has known friendship and love, rejection and disappointment, pleasure and pain. But have you seen Jesus, heard his voice, touched his hand? In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his doubting disciple Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen (me resurrected) and yet have come to believe." But God's knowing how it feels to be human in Jesus long ago is not quite the same as God's knowing how you and I feel here and now. Nobody else has lived your life, felt your joys and sorrows, experienced your triumphs or suffered your defeats. Last Sunday, we baptized five children, and for each I asked the parents, "What is your child's name?" I was not seeking information; I knew the child's name and had already written it on the baptismal certificate, but it was important that the parents speak their child's name before God and the congregation because God loves and calls each of us by name, and we are to respect each as a particular person.

How can we live in conversation with God? That's the question, and I suspect most Christians would give the answer, "prayer." We need to pray. Well, yes, we do, but prayer

is an activity – a good one, but still just an activity, an approach, an attempt at communication. Have you ever felt the need to talk with someone from whom you had become disconnected, made the phone call or written the letter hoping to reconnect, only to have it fall flat and leave you feeling worse than before? Conversation is the practice of connectedness. Older meanings of the word “conversation” have to do with living among people in a place, as a community interacting and sharing life. For nearly twenty-seven years, Debbie and I have had our conversation here in Bridgeton and especially within the community of First Presbyterian Church. We didn’t just stop by or drop in for a visit; we experienced God and life together.

When God sent Jesus to us, into our humanity, God did not just stop by or drop in for a brief visit; God came to stay and to remain in conversation with us. So, when Jesus returned to the Father, as the Gospel of John says, God sent the Spirit to be with us and keep the conversation going at its deepest and most personal levels. In psychological terms, the Holy Spirit is God’s living empathic presence with us and among us, connecting us to God and to each other as God’s daughters and sons. That’s a mouthful, I know – “living empathic presence” – but what it means is that God is right here with us even when we feel alone and that God understands us sympathetically and respectfully even when we don’t understand ourselves and may be having a hard time keeping up our self-respect. That’s why Paul says that when we don’t even know how to pray – what to say or how to put it into words – the Spirit speaks to God for us in ways “too deep for words.” Conversation is a two-way street. The Spirit keeps God with us and us with God. The Spirit also gives us empathy for each other and passion for justice in human life.

Evil is lack of empathy. The Holy Spirit is the agent of empathy, of understanding and respect, of life shared. It is the work of the Spirit to move us to feel the sting of an injustice that does not hurt us personally or touch our families. It is the work of the Spirit to enable us to share each other’s griefs and joys, overcoming what we have been told are the decisive differences among people. It is the holy mission of the Spirit to enable us to live and keep living in a shared as well as deeply personal conversation with God who loves us and calls each by name. It is the Spirit who keeps us united with Jesus so that, together with him, we call out to God, “Abba! Father!” and know ourselves and each other to be, truly, children of God. Amen.