

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ

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Sermon for the Pentecost Communion Service June 12, 2011

Lessons: Isaiah 42:1-4, Zechariah 4:6 and John 14:15-18,25-27; 20:19b-23

SPIRIT THOUGHTS

“Not by might nor by power but by my spirit, says the LORD.” That contrast challenges our customary ways of thinking. God’s thoughts are not like our thoughts; neither are our ways God’s ways. The history of religion as a major concern in human life and society is mostly a story of people’s attempts to harness divine power for their own purposes or claim divine authorization for their personal or national aspirations. The desire behind much of humanity’s religious practice has been to get God (or the gods) on our side, supporting our causes, keeping us safe in a dangerous world, and boosting our success as we pursue our ambitions. Even the unambitious have hoped for divine protection to secure their way of life against unwanted change.

Please understand, what I have described as religious desire is not 100% wrong. The Bible offers a kind of comfort and a certain peace of mind to those who put their trust in God. Jesus himself speaks of God’s support in undertakings for which our own strength is inadequate, but we don’t get to choose the nature of those undertakings. The Gospel of John is very careful to make us realize that first a disciple must know Jesus’ mind, share his purpose, and surrender pride and prejudice to his way of dealing with people and living life; only then does Jesus promise God’s support and assistance. All of which means God will not take our side, except in love’s sense of caring deeply about us and wanting better for us than we may desire for ourselves. We must take God’s side in the struggle to attain human salvation, wholeness, and harmony without taking away human freedom. God is self-restricted to the same principle and method of operation: *not by might nor by power but by my spirit*. If by force God could make us the way God wants us, there would be no struggle. The world would operate exactly as God wished because God’s every wish would be an irresistible command. We would be puppets or robots with exactly the thoughts and feelings God wanted us to have. We would be everything God wanted, except free, and so we would be nothing God wanted. Painful as it can be, love must grant freedom to the one loved. God’s way with us and our world is so much a matter of love that the New Testament declares, “God is love.”

I have given this sermon the title, “Spirit Thoughts.” Some years ago, an inquisitive and skeptical young friend asked me, “Why do we need the Holy Spirit? What’s the difference between saying the Holy Spirit does something and just saying God does it?”

What's the difference between saying God is within us and saying the Spirit of God is within us?" I suppose that in my youth, a minister's response to such questions might well have been directed more at their perceived impertinence than at their substance. *Don't ask such a thing, but just accept the church's teachings on faith!* Rejecting questions such as these has hurt the churches more than I believe they realize. In large numbers, my generation walked away from the church and from the faith. Besides, they are legitimate questions that challenge us to seek deeper and more helpful understandings of our relationship with God and the nature of God's very present participation in it.

The Spirit serves as an advocate and, also, as an intermediary – that is, an advocate *for both parties* and not just one or the other. The Spirit represents God to us but also and at the same time represents us to God. Paul tells the Romans that when we do not know how to put our thoughts and feelings into prayer (can't find the words), the Spirit makes our needs known to God "with sighs too deep for words." What's the difference between saying that and just saying God understands our distresses even when we can't say what's troubling us or what we need? Objectively, I suppose, there would be no rational difference, but God is not objective. The Spirit personalizes God's understanding of us, God's respect for us and our freedom, and God's presence with us and for us. God loves us but will not take away our freedom; neither may we presume to take away God's freedom. In any healthy relationship, there remains always in force a degree of distinction and distance. Yesterday, we held a marriage service. In marriage, the two become one, but they also remain distinctly two free and independent persons, and both must restrain themselves from trespassing upon the other's integrity and liberty. Like Jesus when he was crucified, the Spirit is God-with-us even when we and God are at odds.

Talk about the Holy Spirit must maintain God's integrity and ours, both. The Spirit comes so personally close that the New Testament speaks of the Spirit's being both among us and within us, but God does not possess us in the sense of taking over and controlling our minds, bodies, and wills. The ancients referred to disorders such as severe mental illness or addiction as demon possession because the person so afflicted was robbed of self-control and could not act according to his or her own will. Such "possession," whatever the cause, takes away personal freedom. The Spirit of God does the very opposite. One of "fruits" or effects of the Spirit is self-control. God will not possess us and take over, removing our freedom to love, serve, and make choices willingly. God will not violate our integrity, not even for our own good. That's a deep lesson with many implications for our own human relationships. God will not violate our integrity – not even for our own good. On the contrary, salvation restores human integrity and freedom that have been taken away by something else, whether by bad choices, abusive relationships, addictions, compulsions, internal chemical imbalances that distort thinking and feeling, social forces that have enslaved, prejudices that have corrupted, greed that has consumed, or anything else that has

violated us with or without our permission. I think I can rightly say that salvation is the restoration of integrity and freedom but within the context of love and love's kind of belonging. God says to us in many ways and fully in Jesus Christ, *You belong to me. I created you to love, to return my love, and to share it with each other. But I will not ever possess you or take away your freedom to respond to my love, care for my world, and love each other willingly. If you will not love me back freely and willingly, then I will have to wait for you and you will have to deal with your choices, but I will never stop loving you.*

Our communion with God, therefore, is not a pretty, happy, blithe affair that makes life pleasant and carefree. Our communion with God centers around and happens within the gruesome context of a broken body, shed blood, and a tortured soul. The Spirit bears witness with our own Spirits that because Jesus Christ has united himself with us in an unbreakable bond of compassion and mercy, we are truly adopted daughters and sons of God called to take our places at the family table. Amen.