

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Pentecost Sunday Communion Service, May 31, 2009
Lessons: Isaiah 61:1-4, John 14:15-20, and Romans 8:26-27

HARMONY

Once I was asked by a young adult trying to understand Christian faith why we need the Holy Spirit – that is, why we need to talk about the Spirit as a distinct Person along with the Son and the Father. What is the difference between saying the Spirit is God-with-us and just saying God is with us?

The authoritarian response would be to dismiss the question by declaring that the Bible says so, the church has said so for almost two thousand years, and we say so because it's simply the truth, period. You don't have understand it; just accept it, believe it, and say so. Then you've "got it right." But the Christian life is not an exam with multiple-choice answers, and questions don't go away when they're dismissed. Besides, this question is thoughtful and potentially helpful. The Newer Testament insists that God's own Spirit works within us as individuals and among us as a community of faith. What additional help and hope does the Spirit give us? What further encouragement to faith, hope, and love do we receive from the Holy Spirit?

Jesus was a flesh and blood human being, and, raised by God from the dead, he is one of us forever. But the Holy Spirit is, well, spirit, and, the Bible says also that God is spirit. So, it's not a "dumb question" at all. What more are we saying than simply, "God is with us," when we say the Holy Spirit has been sent for our sake?

One answer speaks of the Spirit as call and empowerment for ministry as in our lesson: "The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted . . ." Another relates the Spirit to religious ecstasy, in which the self is almost lost as an emotional surge overpowers rational thought. I've heard it described as "getting high on Jesus." The Christians in Corinth became obsessed with those religious highs and very proud of their "gifts of the Spirit," especially the ability to speak in "tongues of ecstasy." They split their church into exclusive factions which were proving to be anything but spiritual. Paul tells them to seek the gifts that benefit other people instead of gratifying themselves, and he assures them that any empowerment or religious experience without love is absolutely worthless to God. If the "gifts of the Spirit" feed religious pride and make Christians exclusive, something has gone very wrong.

But let's not dismiss our emotional needs just because they can be over-indulged. There is an emotional aspect to the work of the Holy Spirit that lifts us above our mundane and sometimes depressing levels of daily life, which is important, even though it's dangerous to seek experiences of euphoria through religion or prize them too highly. That kind of religious practice can be as addicting as any other way of getting high, and it neither deepens our knowledge of God nor furthers the ministry of Jesus Christ. Having seen it in action, I am wary of it, but we don't have to go to the other extreme and become entirely intellectual about our faith, as though God were to be found only in books. I can't work this matter out in a sermon, but I know we can love neither God nor people without the liberation of our emotions as well as our thoughts, freeing our hearts as well as our minds. The Spirit works to help us become free at deeper levels than conscious thought and rational belief.

Likewise, yes, it is also the work of the Holy Spirit to empower us for self-development for the purpose of ministry to others. God works through human beings to reach out and help other people in ways that exceed our limited abilities. This is the loaves-and-fishes character of all Christian service. The minister preaches a fairly dull sermon that somehow reaches out and touches someone's heart and life. The church school teacher smiles at a child who feels very unlovable, and it makes more difference than we might think a smile could. In the Bible, ordinary people become extraordinary prophets or leaders when empowered by God's Spirit. I would caution, however, that God's power to do much with very little (the five loaves and two fish we bring to feed a crowd) is no excuse for laziness from those who serve or sloppy thinking from those who preach or teach. Jesus warns us that much will be expected from those to whom much has been given, and Paul cautions all of us not to think more of ourselves than is justified by our abilities, learning, and grace.

Life is relational. It's not a performance, not a test, and not a burden (even in times when it feels burdensome). God has not sent us the Holy Spirit so we can show off in church, outperform others, or escape from the realities and responsibilities of our lives.

Life is relational. Jesus says life is about responding to God's love for us by loving God with every aspect of our being human and by loving our neighbor in deeds of fairness, respect, and grace. Jesus tells us God's relationship with us is not broken by his return to the Father: "I will not leave you orphaned." God does not move further away from us after Jesus' resurrection; rather, God moves deliberately even closer. We are bound to God by something stronger and more reliable than our own faith or our own knowledge. My belief is not strong enough, and my knowledge not complete or right enough. Yet there is something within us and among us that binds both the individual disciple and the community of faith to God, and that something is God's living, personal presence – the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit creates a growing inward and outward harmony between God and us, a harmony of spirits that is more than just empowerment or euphoria. The Spirit puts us on a wavelength with Jesus Christ so that increasingly we develop what Paul calls “the mind of Christ.” The Spirit moves us inwardly to care about the things that matter most to God. The Spirit works within us and our lives to change our attitudes, our responses to other people, our overblown or else under-developed sense of self, and our disappointment-stunted ability to trust, to hope, and to love. By the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit, we are brought to life, usually in very quiet, almost imperceptible ways – the small steps of real change.

God is not contained inside me. God is outside me, another, someone else not me. It’s an I-Thou relationship between us. God chooses to respect me as a person, a unique individual, and I must respect God, also, as unique Person, independent of my thoughts, opinions, and feelings about God. God is who God is, with or without Dick Sindall. I cannot appropriate God for my use, and I am forbidden to try.

So, how can this God who is utterly independent from me and from Christ’s church be also within us and among us? The answer God has given is a living, relational answer. At the mysterious level of spirit, God is among us and within us personally. The Spirit is Person, not power. Paul puts it in a very practical way. Sometimes we are so upset and confused our minds go numb, our limbs feel leaden, and our spirits seem deadened to the point that maybe we can’t even pray. And if we can manage to mouth the words of prayer, they still don’t really express what is inside us. But God’s Spirit maintains this connection, this harmony between us and God – this empathy that not only understands our situation but feels it with us. In Jesus Christ, God knows how it feels to be human. God understands, not with judgment, but with compassion. The Spirit maintains that empathy, that compassion, even when words fail us and faith seems distant and maybe, at extreme times, almost repugnant to us. Maybe the best I can put it this morning is to say that when life punches us in the stomach, the Spirit takes the punch with us and lets God know how it feels.

I take comfort in knowing that my belonging with Christ to God does not depend upon my level of understanding or the strength of my faith. That’s no excuse to stop learning and trying to trust, but it helps to know I have more working for me than just my best efforts.

This is a mystery, and I must deliberately leave it as a mystery. How can God stand apart from me, facing me in this I-Thou relationship, but at the same time be on my side and even within me? That is the mystery of redeeming love. I have to say with Paul, “Now I know only in part and trust only imperfectly; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.” To be fully known and understood, valued and respected as a person, and loved for who I am and who I shall be is the wonder of divine grace and the mystery of the Spirit of God. Amen.