

I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT...

Apostles' Creed Sermon Series, week 3
A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Matthew 3:16-17, 28:19-20
Acts 2:1-4, 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19

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It was two weeks ago when we began this sermon series on the Apostles' Creed. On that Sunday, we declared that we believe in "God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." As Christians, we believe the existence of the universe as well as our existence bear witness to a Creating God who is intelligent and powerful. But we also believe that God is personal, intimate, and relational. God is the force and power behind everything, but God also has all the attributes of personhood. So, when we as Christians look at the universe and one another, we see the presence of a creative, intelligent, powerful, and loving God, and such an understanding of God humbles us, fills us with gratitude, compels us to praise and worship, and places within us a desire to understand God's will and do it. To believe and trust in God allows us to live each day with greater peace, hope and purpose.

Just last Sunday, we confirmed our belief in "Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord..." As Christians, we believe God put on flesh in Jesus; we refer to this as the Incarnation. Jesus was God with us, walking in our shoes and meeting us on our own ground. It is in Jesus that God revealed himself to us in a way that we can relate to and connect with. In Jesus, we can actually see God's character, will and purposes. In Jesus, we can see God's heart for those who are lost, hurting, sick and made to feel small and unimportant. In Jesus' death, we see the depth of God's love and the costliness of grace. In Jesus' resurrection, we see God's triumph over evil, sin and death. To believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord is to place our highest allegiance in him and to commit ourselves to living like he lived.

Today, our faith declaration is "I believe in the Holy Spirit..." To speak of the Holy Spirit is to speak of God's imminent presence – a presence that comes alongside us and is at work within us, empowering, guiding and shaping us. Whereas the God who created this great big universe and all of us can seem beyond us and bigger than we can comprehend, and Jesus who revealed the heart and will of God in ways we can relate to but who lived a very long time ago, the Holy Spirit is present here and now.

Just before Jesus left this earth, he told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem and he would send the Spirit: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Jesus assured his disciples then and now that we would not be left alone to face life, because God would send the Holy Spirit to be with us. It was a few days later, on the day of Pentecost, that the Spirit arrived, "And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. (Acts 2:2). I love this imagery of rushing wind and its connection with the Creation Story in Genesis. It was at creation that God breathed into the man and woman and animated them with life. On Pentecost God breathed upon Jesus' followers; God filled them and recreated them. In the Bible, the word "spirit" shows up about five hundred times. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word usually translated as "spirit" is "ruach." In the New Testament the Greek word is

"pneuma." Both the Hebrew and Greek words have multiple meanings including breath, air, wind, and of course, spirit. All these meanings are filled with a sense of movement and impact.

When we speak of the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of God, we are speaking of God's active presence and work in our lives. We are speaking of God leading us, guiding us, forming and shaping us. We are speaking of God's power and presence to comfort and encourage us and to make us the people God wants us to be. The Spirit is the voice of God whispering and beckoning us. By listening to God's Spirit voice and being shaped by God's Spirit power, we become most fully and authentically human, like Jesus.

Consider for a moment the voices you hear in your head – some of those voices are good, some are likely not so good. For us, those voices might be the whisper of temptation calling us to do things that are not at all like Jesus. And then there are the actual human voices that call to us and that we listen to. Some of those voices influence us positively and make us more loving, compassionate, and kind. But other voices influence us to harden our hearts, to be indifferent, prideful, selfish, judgmental and to do things we should never do. So, what voices and powers influence you the most in your daily decision making? Do the voices of friends, media, politicians, and even preachers lead you to become more or less like Jesus – more or less like the person God wants you to be? How are the voices in your life shaping you?

I will return to the voice and work of the Spirit in our lives, but for now, I want to focus on the relationship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, a relationship we Christians refer to as the Trinity. There is an interesting scene that occurs as Jesus begins his public ministry. *"And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased"* (Matthew 3:16-17). In this one scene we see the presence of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Later, at the time of his ascension to heaven, Jesus personally mentions all three when he says, *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you..."* (Matthew 28:19-20).

These two passages as well as many others in the New Testament mention the Father, Son and Spirit, but none of the passages provide much help when it comes to explaining the interrelationship of the three. Because we refer to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, there are those who question our Christian belief in only one God. And yet, we firmly stand on our belief in one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Yes, it's a bit confusing and Christians spent hundreds of years trying to clarify and articulate what we mean by the word "Trinity." The word "Trinity" does not explicitly appear in the New Testament and was never specifically mentioned by Jesus, and yet as I just mentioned there are many references to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit throughout the New Testament. My own conviction is that the three pounds of gray matter we call a brain is not up to the task of fully comprehending the nature of God. No one fully understands, but analogies have been used over the years to try to explain the mind-blowing concept of the Trinity.

When I was younger, the analogy I heard most often compared the Trinity with H₂O or water. H₂O exists in three different forms a solid, liquid, and gas or in other words ice, water, and steam. At that time, the comparison helped me better understand how one thing can exist and yet be seen and experienced in three distinct forms. Some think that a much better comparison to use is that of the atom. An atom is made up of three types of particles: protons, neutrons, and electrons. An atom of helium is not an atom of helium without protons, neutrons, and electrons. All three are essential to make an atom. We can also look no further than ourselves to see another reflection of the Trinity. Consider yourself. You are not simply a body or a mind or a spirit. It is all three of these things, taken together, that make you who you are. All three of these distinct components are essential to being an individual human being and yet they are all connected. Of course, all these analogies break down, but perhaps each offers some insight when trying to understand what it means to believe in the Trinity.

Here's a diagram that might help. It's called the Shield of the Trinity and it's been around since the early 1200's. As you can see, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct entities – the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, the Spirit is not the Father. However, The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God. I think this diagram helps capture the idea of "God in three persons, blessed trinity." Therefore, when we pray, regardless of whom we address in prayer, we are speaking to one God who is Father, Son and Spirit. Though the Father is associated with the creation of all, and the Son with the redemption of all, and the Spirit with the sustaining of all, each "person" of the Trinity is involved by virtue of their shared identity as God. The three are in an inseparable relationship with one another that reflects love, community and a unity of being and purpose.

Perhaps your brain hurts trying to get your mind around the triune nature of God! In the end, our Christian concept of the Trinity is a paradox – "mystery" might be an even better word. I think I understand a bit, and I trust where my understanding fails. And I believe that when I die, I will likely fall on my knees in awe and wonder as I finally comprehend what on this side of eternity seems nearly incomprehensible. But even though I do not fully understand, I believe the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God.

So, let's move back now to why our belief in and experience of the Holy Spirit as Christians matters. In Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul wrote, "*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you...* (1 Corinthians 6:19). In this verse, the word "you" is singular, so Paul is speaking to individual Christians. He is saying that the Spirit dwells in every believer, and that each of us is a living, breathing bearer of God's presence in the world. In a different verse, Paul wrote, "*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?*" (1 Corinthians 3:16). In this verse, the "you" is plural, so Paul is referring to the church, the gathering of believers. Back in 2019, I walked the streets of ancient Corinth, and there were temples to the pagan gods on practically every corner. Temples were physical reminders of the gods they represented, and places where the gods were thought to dwell among the people. Paul wanted the small Christian community in Corinth to know that they, as a group of believers, were themselves a temple. In other words, the Spirit of God is present in their faith community just as the Spirit is present in each of them as individual believers.

Through persistent nudges, the Spirit convicts us and quickens our conscience when we're doing wrong. The Spirit helps us pray. The Spirit urges us to act selflessly to accomplish God's will and to care for others. The Spirit makes us long to be more like Jesus. Paul described the Spirit's work impact on our lives as the "Fruit of the Spirit." "*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*" (Galatians 5:22-23). When we open ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit, we find power to be transformed, to be more like Jesus, and to be useful in our working to fulfill God's purposes.

Now I don't know about you, but sometimes, I feel a nudge – a thought comes across my mind to call someone I haven't thought of for a while or to stop and speak with someone I could have easily walked right by. I've learned to pay attention when I feel those nudges, because something important tends to happen when I do. However, I admit that I sometimes ignore those nudges because I am busy or tired or it's an inconvenient time. When I ignore the nudge, I'm convinced that I miss out on something important. There are moments when I feel God's presence in the form of warmth, love, or peace, and I believe such moments occur because of the Holy Spirit. There are other times when a flash of insight comes to me that I would have never thought of. I especially appreciate those flashes when I am writing a sermon, and I believe such inspirations are from the Spirit. After worship, often one or more of you who will say something like, "I feel like your message was just for me today" or "Your message was exactly what I needed to hear today." I believe this, too, is the Holy Spirit at work, taking my feeble, far from perfect attempt at a sermon and using it as a vehicle to speak to you.

Unfortunately, I think too many Christians live Spirit-deficient lives and as a result, both our inward spiritual life and our outwardly lived faith life are rather anemic because we are functioning on our own power and wisdom instead of God's power and wisdom. If we've committed ourselves to following Jesus, then the Spirit is speaking, calling, forming, and empowering us, but that doesn't mean we are listening and responding. We can ignore and even resist the Spirit or we can welcome and embrace the Spirit. To be Spirit empowered followers of Jesus, we need to make time; we need to make room; we need to listen and we then need to act. But our lives tend to be noisy and filled with so many distractions and other voices. These things can and do drown out the Spirit's voice, a voice that is sometimes expressed with a hard-to-miss force like on the day of Pentecost but is more likely to find expression as a whisper, a still small voice. Have you ever been talking to your spouse or perhaps someone else, and it becomes very clear that person is not paying attention, that person is not listening to you? Perhaps that person is distracted by their phone, a TV show, or simply zoned out thinking about something else. I think we do this regularly when it comes to the Holy Spirit, so we need to put more effort into listening to the voice and feeling the nudging of the Holy Spirit. We need to open ourselves and be receptive to the Spirit's work within us. So, I invite you to join me in saying the following prayer...

Come, Holy Spirit, I need you. Breath of God, fill me wholly and completely. Form and shape me into the person you want me to be. Lead me to do what you want me to do. Empower me and use me; speak to me and through me. Produce your fruit in me and help me claim and use your gifts to me. Help me to listen to your voice above all other voices that clamor for my attention. Come, Holy Spirit. Amen.