

## SERMON: “The Work of the Holy Spirit Among Us”

Pentecost Sunday, 2009

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Almighty God, at the feast of Pentecost you sent your Holy Spirit to the gathered disciples, filling them with new boldness to proclaim your gospel and embody your love, grant now that by the same Spirit your word may come alive in our hearing and understanding so that we, too, may be empowered for faithful witness in this time and place; through Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

First Lesson: Acts 2:1-7, 12-13

Second Lesson: 1 Corinthians 12:1-7, 12-13

Today, on Pentecost Sunday, the Church throughout the world celebrates the gift of the Holy Spirit by which the Church is empowered in every age to bear witness to Jesus Christ and to live together in Christian community. And later this morning at the 11:15 a.m. /a little later in this service/ we will ordain and install a new class of Elders and Deacons. It is particularly appropriate that we do so on Pentecost Sunday. Apart from the work of the Spirit in their lives, no matter how capable or conscientious our new officers may be, they will accomplish little that is of lasting value in the life and ministry of this congregation. So this morning, on Pentecost Sunday, we consider the work of the Holy Spirit among us.

Let’s begin by acknowledging that there is much about the Spirit that we do not know or understand. The Spirit does not sit still for portraits. In the Gospel of John, Jesus uses the familiar metaphor of the wind to point to the work of the Spirit. Jesus says that just as **“the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it but do not know where it comes from or where it goes, so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”** The Spirit of the living God is as free and uncontrollable as the wind.

In both Hebrew and Greek, and several other languages as well, the same word can mean both **wind and spirit**—*ruach* in Hebrew, *pneuma* in Greek. Wind is a particularly appropriate image for the Spirit. We can see its effects and feel its power, but we do not see the wind itself, and we can no more command or contain the wind than we can bottle up the ocean.

There is an old legend about an Indian chief who saw the Pacific Ocean for the first time. He was awed by its vastness and by the thunder of its waves. The chief asked for a stone jar. He waded into the surf, and filled the jar with water. When asked what he intended to do with it, he replied, “My people have never seen the Great Water. I will carry this jar to them so that they can see what it is like.”

All our attempts to encompass the work of the Holy Spirit are as futile as bottling the ocean in a jar. There is always a deep mystery to the work of God’s Spirit among us and within us. The Holy Spirit is the personal presence of the God who with a Word called the universe into being and declared it good, and who in the Word-made-flesh lived and died and rose again for us and our salvation. The Spirit is the active, personal power of God’s holy love within us and among us.

The Holy Spirit is not just some strange, bizarre force that may take over your life and cause you to do all sorts of irrational things. The Spirit is the power in our lives of the same

divine love that was incarnate in Jesus Christ. It is the proper work of the Spirit always to point to Jesus Christ and to unite us with Christ and all his people. As John Calvin never tired of saying, it is the Spirit who makes effective in our lives all that Christ has done for us.

Someone has called the Spirit “the shy member” of the Trinity. It is an appropriate image. As “the shy member of the Trinity” the Spirit never calls attention to himself, but always points to Jesus Christ and his work of redemption. Jesus promises his disciples,

**“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, for he will glorify me and he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”**

That gives us some very important criteria for judging the various forms of “spirituality” that are so in vogue today. A popular religious writer said recently that if she had a dollar for every time she heard someone say “I am spiritual but not religious,” she might not be any wiser about what that means, but she would be a lot richer.<sup>1</sup> There is obviously a great deal of interest today in “spirituality,” whatever that means. It means different things to different people. Yet despite all the differences, much of the renewed interest in “spirituality” grows out of a feeling that we have lost an invigorating sense of meaning and purpose to our lives. We find ourselves bored, burned-out, trapped in jobs that stimulate our minds but empty our souls. In countless ways people hunger for new joy, new enthusiasm, and new energy—something, almost anything, to make them ‘feel alive’ again, and to give them hope that things can be different in their lives and in the world. However we may describe it, theologically we can say that our deepest hunger is for the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life.<sup>2</sup>

But you know as well as I do that there are all sorts of things that go by the name of “spirituality” these days, and not all of them are good, by any means. Scripture urges us to “**test the spirits,**” to see which are from God and which are not.

In his first Letter to the church at Corinth, a church that was deeply divided over what it means to be “spiritual,” Paul begins a section on the gifts of the Spirit with these words that we read a moment ago.

**“Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says ‘Let Jesus be cursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.”**

One of the primary ways by which we can test whatever poses as “spirituality” today is to ask whether it **magnifies Jesus Christ as Lord, and empowers us to follow his way of self-giving love.**

But if saying “**Jesus is Lord**” sounds simple enough, with few, if any, consequences, think again. To declare that “**Jesus is Lord**” is to insist that none of the other powers that claim our allegiance is Lord. None is to be worshipped; none is to be given unconditional allegiance--not President Obama or Rush Limbaugh, not the United States of America or our economic

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World* (HarperOne, 2009) p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Paraphrased from Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine—Revised Edition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) p. 291

system, not your family or your church. To say that **“Jesus is Lord”** is to dethrone all other principalities and powers that claim our ultimate loyalty. That can be deeply challenging... and costly.

Seventy-five years ago today a group of Germany evangelical Christians adopted a ringing affirmation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the face of Adolph Hitler’s attempts to co-opt the church for his own political purposes. The *Theological Declaration of Barmen*, written largely by the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, declared,

“Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. (consequently...) We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords (other Führers).”<sup>3</sup>

For that confession of faith some paid the ultimate “cost of discipleship” with their lives.

Paul insists that **“No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.”** That is the primary way we “test the spirits” to see if they are of God. Any form of “spirituality” that focuses more on our selves--on our desires, our ambitions, our causes, than on Jesus Christ is not from the Holy Spirit.

The same can be said for any form of “spirituality” that tempts us to turn away from the **goodness and the struggles of life in *this world***. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the God who created all things and declared them good, and the Spirit of Jesus Christ who lived among full of grace and truth. The late Shirley Guthrie put it well when he wrote,

The Holy Spirit enables people not to escape *from* the world but to live *in* it in such a way that not only their personal lives, but also the world around them, begins to be made new. Truly spiritual people, therefore, are not recognized by how suspicious they are of physical needs and pleasures, but by how joyfully, thankfully, and responsibly they are acknowledged as good gifts of God. They are recognized not just by how much they pray, but how much they pray for the world. They are recognized not just by how much they ‘praise the Lord’ for what ‘the Lord has done for me,’ but by how sensitive their praise makes them to the needs and hurts of other people and the protection of the natural environment in which they live. They are recognized not just by how much they read the Bible, but by how their Bible reading influences their business practices, political commitments, and social relationships. They are not recognized just by their testimonies to how God befriended and came to their aid when they were lost in sin, but by the way they befriend and come to the aid of other lost sinners.<sup>4</sup>

As the Spirit of the risen, incarnate Christ, the Holy Spirit does not call us to retreat from the world God loves and even now is remaking, but to be actively involved in the world, proclaiming boldly the good news of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and sharing life together in the Body of Christ on earth.

In the light of all this, two things stand out for me as to what the Spirit is doing in our own lives now. First, we can say that the Spirit is empowering us to **come alive**. The most widely

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<sup>3</sup> Theological Declaration of Barmen, *Book of Confessions PC(USA)*

<sup>4</sup> Guthrie, p. 300. (Guthrie’s whole chapter on the Holy Spirit is superb.)

used of all the Christian Creeds, the Nicene Creed, which we will use next Sunday, calls the Holy Spirit “**the Lord, the Giver of Life.**” The Spirit of the living God is at work in your life and mine today calling us to come alive. The Spirit does not seek to make us “religious,” in the narrow way the word too often is understood. The Spirit seeks to make us REAL, to make us whole, to set us free from the contradictions of our lives that keep us from living as God’s beloved children. Wherever you feel a stirring of new life, new hope, deeper love within you, there the Holy Spirit is at work in your life.

One of the great Protestant theologians of a generation ago, Paul Tillich, put it this way in one of his sermons.

The Spirit can give you courage to say ‘Yes’ to life, in spite of the destructiveness you have experienced around you and within you. The Spirit can work in you with a soft but insistent voice, telling you that although your life seems empty...there are chances of a new life waiting to fill its void and conquer its dullness. The Spirit can reveal to you that you have hurt someone deeply, but can also give you the right word that reunites that one to you. The Spirit can transform your moods of aggression or depression into stability or serenity. The Spirit can give you joy in the midst of ordinary routine as well as in the depth of sorrow.... The Spirit can create warmth in the coldness you feel within you and around you, and it can give you wisdom and strength where your human love toward a loved one has failed.... The Spirit can give you the power of prayer, that no one has except through the presence and power of the Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

First, as the Lord and Giver of Life, the Holy Spirit wants you to **come alive** in God. And at the same time the Spirit wants to **empower you**—to empower you to share in Christ’s work in the world. I challenge all of us, especially our new officers, to pray everyday for the fresh empowerment of the Spirit for the work to which we are called as God’s compassionate people.

But I suppose I better warn you that your prayers may be answered. Be careful what you pray for--for the Spirit does not give us everything we want; the Spirit demands everything we have. The Spirit does not help us escape from a broken world; the Spirit sends us *into* the world as agents of Christ’s reconciling love. The Spirit does not always save us *from* our weakness, but enables us *in* our weakness to help and comfort one another. The Spirit does not protect us from all suffering, but assures us that even in our suffering, God is “at work for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.” And most of all the Spirit does not just give us gifts for our personal advantage; the Spirit empowers us to pursue what Paul calls the “more excellent way” of love, the way that builds up the common good, and bind us to Jesus Christ and to one another, as we share in the eternal fellowship of the Holy Spirit. And so we, too, pray as we sing,

“Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove, with all Thy quickening powers;  
Come shed abroad a Savior’s love, And that shall kindle ours.”<sup>6</sup>

So be it Lord, so be it. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963, pp. 85-86

<sup>6</sup> “Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove,” Isaac Watts, 170, *Presbyterian Hymnal*, No. 126.