

**“THE SPIRIT OF GOD IN YOU”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Richard D. Clewell**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**May 13, 2007**  
**Scripture: John 14: 15-27**

Not too long ago the Wednesday morning Men’s Breakfast Forum was discussing where the human quest for God or spiritual meaning comes from. Throughout human history people have expressed this need through religious rites, writings and institutions. Were we created with this basic core? Is it part of the wiring of our brain? Is that what being “in the image of God” means? We never arrived at a definitive answer but did endorse that we do appear to have the propensity to require meaning and relationship beyond our own individual concerns.

The Christian faith often refers to the heart as the place where spirituality is sourced. The great preacher, George Buttrick, speaks of faith in this manner, “Faith must never be counter to reason; yet it must always go beyond reason, for the nature of man is more than rationalism. Faith is emotion as well as reason.”

Today’s Gospel text is interesting and helpful in describing where spirituality is developed in the life of those who follow Jesus Christ. (read John 14:15-27). Jesus declares to his disciples that in their relationship of love for him, they will seek to be obedient to what he has taught and called them to do. He promises to be a living presence in their on-going lives through another advocate (paraclete, Gk.), an exhorter and encourager, a comforter, a helper, an appealer even as Christ had been during his ministry with them. This spirit of truth thus continues the new connection and restored relationship in the risen Christ for his followers in all generations. This relationship does not depend on Christ’s physical presence but on the presence of the love of God in the life of the Christian and the community of faith. The place of the Spirit is to inform and remind believers of Christ’s word and to encourage their love as a sign of fidelity to Christ and what they’ve been called to be.

The second promise of the advocate, the Holy Spirit (v.26), will be helping them remember Christ’s teachings for deeper understanding and faith development. This referral to the advocate as the Holy Spirit is the one and only time mentioned in John’s Gospel. It speaks more accurately of the Spirit of Christ informing one’s conscience, not the Holy Spirit of the Trinity which was not developed in theology until much later in church tradition. The purpose of such an indwelling Spirit is to keep Jesus’ teachings alive in the post-resurrection community so it can share appropriately in God’s work and mission in the creation.

The final new promise (v.27) in this farewell discourse is a bequest – “peace.” They will not be alone because they live in the peace Christ gives. It’s not the world’s kind of false promise of security or the end of conflict. This peace has nothing to do with the absence of trouble and everything to do with the presence of God as a reality in one’s life and in the community of faith. This peace involves the encompassing of Christ’s words, his love and his joy. This peace is not an occasion for complacency but a call for the disciples to find strength to face the new circumstances in which Jesus’ departure places them. The purpose of this passage of scripture is to prepare the community of Christ’s followers in all ages for life in his

absence. It moves all disciples beyond the present moment in which they are living into the future that is grounded in the post-resurrection Jesus and the Spirit-filled life. This future is shaped by the promises of the always present God demonstrated through their love for one another. This gift God has given in Jesus takes on new shape as the advocate Spirit informs and enables them (and us) to live out God's commandment to love.

This perception of God in continuing relationship with Christ's post-resurrection followers emphasizes restored relationship, intimacy, and a genuine sense of belonging. It refocuses on the scriptural concept of the Spirit as God's presence in creation and in the history of Israel and the on-going church. The word for Spirit (*ruach*, Heb.) means "wind" and "breath" – both of which are invisible but yet very real. Though we cannot see the wind, its presence and effect are felt. When it blows, it is all around us. Breath is like wind inside the body and is associated with the continuance of life. In this view God is the encompassing Spirit both within us and outside us.

What difference does this understanding of the Spirit make in the living of our faith? It seems to me, the nearness of God becomes real and the relationship and connection develops. The Spirit's compassion can become our passion. The use of covenant in both testaments stresses the divine-human relationship of access and dialog; an "I-you" focus on our relationship to the one to whom we belong.

The Spirit within us also changes the way we experience our Christian life. Creation is not something that happened back when but is what is always happening. The human condition's central problem is not sin and guilt but rather estrangement or separation from that to which one belongs. Whether we experience this or not, we are in God, belong to God and God is present to us. Our problem is often our blindness to the presence of God within and around us. This blindness affects both the individual who remains unsatisfied and unfulfilled and also impacts the suffering and continuing injustice in the social order. The Spirit of God is lord of life and death. The Spirit liberates from systems of the world culture. This Spirit grieves with and takes the side of those oppressed under systems of domination and self-serving power. Life in relationship to God frees you and me to live a fuller and certainly more meaningful life.

Perhaps most important of all, this connection with the Spirit residing in us produces a different outlook on the life we lead as Christians. Rather than God being a distant figure with whom we might spend eternity, the spirit and the sacred is right here. God is the one who loves and wants to be in relationship with us. This central dynamic of relationship informs and transforms our connections to God, to each other and to the world. The Christian life is a turning toward and a growing intimacy with the one who is already in relationship with us. This growing consciousness helps us to recognize the one who loves us and journeys with us.

Some years ago I was working with a confirmation class and one young man was struggling with the concept of the Spirit and what it meant for his life as a follower of Christ. He insisted that it was hokey and a little spooky. He just couldn't buy the concept. Several months after this conversation he related an event which had just happened. He was with a couple of school friends who decided to give a neighbor youth who was labeled "a sissy" a beating to show him how "real men" handled things. As they approached the moment, he said he had an overwhelming sense that he was denying his faith. He stopped the others from the

plan declaring that what they were doing was dead wrong. I asked him why he thought that happened. He responded, “I remembered Jesus’ words, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” Then unexpectedly added, “Do you suppose that was the Spirit in me?”

Throughout the scriptures the heart is spoken of as the core of spiritual life. Jeremiah spoke of “a new covenant to be written on the heart” and consisting of knowing God in an experiential way (Jer. 31: 31-34). This new covenant opens us to the reality of the Spirit within us. This sense of sacred presence continues to develop through reading scripture, prayer, worship and sharing in community. Spirituality is about entering relationship in the present that begins to change everything now. It is about a process of reconnecting with the ever-present God who loves us continually and produces in us the character of compassion which is the central test whether something is “of God.” The Christian life as life in the Spirit involves a continuing process of transformation made alive within us by the Spirit of God. The Apostle Paul describes it well: “And we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord Christ, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; and this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” (2 Cor. 3-18)

So, how is it for you? As we pay attention to God’s way through the prompting of the Spirit, our Christian identity and character are being formed, our faith nourished, we develop compassion for others and a passion for involving our courage and energies for justice, and we journey forward in living “the way.” Michael Downey describes this process clearly when he states, “Spirituality is a slippery term, but the phenomenon itself is not new. Christian spirituality is nothing other than life in Christ by the presence and power of the Spirit; being conformed to the person of Christ and being united in communion with God and with others. Spirituality is not an aspect of the Christian life, it is the Christian life.” May God help us to be increasingly aware of the Spirit of Christ in us and leading us in the way which transforms our lives, in love that impacts others and cultural systems which oppress, and in hope that demonstrates the resurrection power of the living and always loving Lord.

Amen

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