

“The Spirit Bearing Witness”
A Sermon by Martha (Missy) Shiverick
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Romans 8:14-17

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a Spirit of adoption. When we cry “Abba Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Today we celebrate Pentecost. At one church where I worked, the congregation all wore red to symbolize the fire of the Spirit and the children sent cards to shut-ins which wished “Happy Birthday” to the church. I always hoped that members of that church wouldn’t question me as to what wearing red and sending birthday cards meant theologically about the Pentecost event, and happily it never happened. It has given me the time I needed to wrestle with these issues myself.

It used to be the one Christian holiday which I just didn’t get. The Pentecost story of the Holy Spirit descending upon the disciples and having them speak in different languages was pretty amazing. Perhaps they themselves needed to become a living parable to show what their new “post-Jesus” mission and calling would be. It took a radical experience to realize that their call was now to spread the Gospel message out in to the world. We read the account and say it was consistent with the whole Luke-acts theme of the church moving outwards, of taking Christ’s message out to communities that had never heard Jesus speak, had never received the good news. Ah Hah! That must explain those birthday cards! That must be why Pentecost is also the birthday of the church.....

And after that Pentecost event, what then was the role of the Holy Spirit? We pray to our Trinitarian God calling God names such as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, or Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer but do we really think about what that means. For some of us here today the Holy Spirit might be the part of the Trinity which we feel closest to while others say that while they have faith in God the Creator and Jesus the son of God or the historical Jesus who walked on earth, but the Holy Spirit eludes their understanding. If you are in this boat, you are not alone. This morning I hope to help you reach a better understanding of this elusive third party in the trinity or perhaps I will just end up confusing you more.

Just this week I sat next to a man at dinner who attends that church across the street. He sits on the vestry of the church which is the equivalent of being an Elder and being on Session in our church. He said that last month he polled this lay group and asked them who really believed and understood what “God in three persons” meant and he then told me that not too many hands went up. I dare say we would have the same response if we asked our session. He then asked me to explain it to him. Well, since it was a dinner party and I wasn’t really hoping to talk deep theology all night long I quickly gave him what I thought was the most easy to understand explanation. I said that we know of God through God’s mighty deeds in the Hebrew Scriptures and the covenantal relationship that was made with those who worship God. We know the historical Jesus through the accounts of his life and teachings in the Bible and other sources, and we experience the Holy Spirit in every way we experience God with us today. He looked surprised at what I said. He said it had never really been explained to him before. Well, I said, there is really a lot more to it with which theologians fill volumes of texts, but that is my simplistic faith, not theirs. He seemed satisfied with the response.

So what exactly did come down at Pentecost? What is this Holy Spirit and what does it have to do with our common phrase of all having Spiritual Gifts to work towards God’s purposes. Can we accept the statement of belief that God’s Holy Spirit is God’s eternal presence with God’s people, with God’s church, and with the world? That seems a bit vague and we Christians, who have a very personal relationship with God, want real answers that impact our life and actions. We pray to our God about our most intimate thoughts and believe that God knows our individual needs, desires, and pressures. And because of this relationship, we should be able to talk about our God in less academic and more personal ways as well. And that personal relationship we feel with God is because of the gift of God’s Spirit.

I have shared this story with some of you about a discussion I had with my friend Rabbi David Aaron about this. He commented to me once how we Christians get so sappy and emotional with God. He thought we might be the only religion to have this “Abba”, this “Daddy” like feeling about our deity. The God of the Hebrew Scriptures is a God of Law, a covenantal God who cares for his people, but not one with whom you have what he considered to be our sentimental relationship. We discussed why this changed from the Jewish religion to the Christian one. Certainly it had to do with Jesus. After all, we believe that Jesus was God’s son who came to tell us of God’s love. Jesus was an intermediary in that he came to tell God’s message. He was God’s son. And then there is this gift of the Holy Spirit, which is God’s promise to be with us and within us. It makes our faith in God more intimate. It makes our faith in God more involved in every aspect of our life.

In the epistle lesson this morning Paul discusses this intimate relationship we have with God. Paul says it is by the Spirit that Christians learn to call God Abba, which is the same word Jesus used at Gethsemane when he was praying alone. Through the Holy Spirit, we no longer need an intermediary who calls God daddy. Paul says

we now are adopted by God, we are God's children and have the same personal loving relationship with God that Jesus had. Paul says that through the Spirit of God, we are no longer tied things which used to enslave us, but are God's children and heirs of all that God can give. Through the Spirit, we have become adopted and are heirs like Christ to God's glories. However, like heirs and family, we also share the same burdens and share the same responsibilities. As Bible scholar William Barclay describes, 'It was Paul's very picture that when a person became a Christian, they entered into the very family of God. The Christian did nothing to deserve it, God, with amazing love and mercy, has taken the lost, helpless poverty stricken, debt-laden sinner and adopted the Christian to God's own family, so that the debts are cancelled and the Glory inherited.'

Although the Holy Spirit is a gift from God which we do nothing to deserve or receive, it does have strings attached to it. That is why Paul describes our becoming heirs of God as suffering as well as sharing in the glory. The newest catechism in our church which is the basis for the curriculum we use for the confirmation class says there is a three fold action of God's Spirit. The first two speak to the description of the gift of the Spirit, these being the gifts of adoption and becoming a true child of God. But the third speaks to our action that this gift means we must give as well. You see the Spirit gathers, builds up, and sends out the church.

First, the Holy Spirit gathers us together as a church. It is God's Spirit that unites us in a faith community called the church. We should remember that as a church God is already there. We do not need to invoke God to be present in our midst. God already is. Another thing that is important to remember about this faith community is that no one has earned their presence in it but all are there at God's invitation. Our church and every church should be inclusive communities. Theologian Keith Curran says that there is always a temptation to think that some of those who are here do not really belong. The Holy Spirit reminds us that not only do we sometimes think that way about others, but that they may be thinking the same about us. So thank God for grace and the Spirit of Christ, who unites us as the church, a family of faith that can speak the truth in love and allow us to love in spite of our differences.

Secondly, the Spirit of God builds us up in faith, hope and love. Paul talks a lot about the gifts of the Spirit. In the 12 and 13th chapters of Corinthians he lists many of them and says that Christian love is the greatest of them. We had a wedding in our church yesterday and the couple asked for the verses from I Corinthians 13 about love be read and also asked for a homily on the verses. Although the couple knew the love that Paul was describing was spiritual love, not romantic or brotherly love, I wonder how many of their guests at the wedding had ever made the distinction. Agape is the love that God's Spirit builds up in us. It is a love that gives even at the risk of giving everything away.

There is an ancient Gaelic legend that tells of an eagle that swoops down and grabs a small child and takes it up to its mountaintop home. The whole village tries to help and all the strong men in the village attempt to climb the steep rock face to retrieve the child. None can make it. They realize they failed at their task. Then the most amazing thing happens. A slender woman climbs past them and with every ounce of her strength reaches the top and rescues the child. When asked how she could do it, she explained, I am the child's mother. Her love outdistanced the strongest and so does our love when God's Spirit enables it. These Spiritual gifts of faith, hope and love are strong stuff!

The third thing God's Spirit does is that it sends us out into the world to share the Gospel which must include Christ's message of justice and peace. We can not speak of our faith without also talking about our calling to do God's work, our mission to work for justice and mercy. Our faith is a call to serve and Jesus has told us we will be judged on our response to that calling. As Robert Kennedy said, each time we stand for an ideal, or act to improve the lot of others, or strike out against injustice, we send forth a tiny ripple of hope in this world. Kennedy's challenge sounds much like a call to join the Holy Spirit in its work. The Holy Spirit sends us out to do what is just, to love mercy, and to live in humble fellowship with our God and each other. In response to all that God has given us, we are to ask the Holy Spirit to send us out to the people, places, and situations where we can share the gospel of peace and justice in the week ahead.

Pentecost is a powerful celebration. Recognizing the Holy Spirit in our midst and inviting the Holy Spirit into our life is a radical step of our faith. It makes our faith living and immediate. It calls us into action and accountability. Accepting the Holy Spirit in our midst might be the single most exciting thing we can do in our faith journey. Welcome to the wild ride! Amen.

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