

**"The First Work of the Spirit"**  
**Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter**  
**Lectionary Year A**  
**March 30, 2008**  
**Text: John 20:19-31**  
**Dr. David T. Howeth**

The writer of the Gospel of John decided to tell the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit in a completely different way than did the writer of Acts. We know well the story from the first couple of chapters of Acts. Jesus had been crucified, buried, and then raised by God on the third day. Christ had made several appearances to his followers and engaged in the additional teaching of his disciples over a period of six weeks. Jesus then ascended into heaven, instructing his followers to go to Jerusalem and to wait patiently for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Then on Pentecost, as the disciples were gathered together in a room, the Spirit, appearing as tongues of fire, came upon the men and women there. With the empowerment of the Spirit, these apostles were able to preach about Jesus to the crowds of people who had journeyed to Jerusalem to celebrate the festival. The Spirit allowed the followers of Jesus to communicate with all who were there, no matter what language they spoke. Three thousand people accepted Christ as their Savior and Lord on Pentecost, as a result of the power

of the Holy Spirit working through Jesus' disciples. The church was begun on that day, as new believers in Christ began to gather together for worship, study, prayer, communion, fellowship, and ministry.

But the story in John is nothing like the story in Acts. In John, the Holy Spirit is given to the disciples by Jesus personally prior to his ascension. The disciples are not following their Lord's command to wait patiently for the Spirit; instead they are in hiding, with the doors locked and the windows barred out of fear that what had happened to Jesus would happen to them. In John, the Holy Spirit is not expected, but comes as a surprise. Precisely because John's account is so different, it helps us to learn some things about the Holy Spirit we might have overlooked if the only narrative concerning the Spirit's coming were the one found in Acts.

For example, John makes it clear, by choosing to tell the story the way he does, that the Holy Spirit is *Christ's* Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes from Christ; Jesus is the immediate source of the Spirit. There is good scriptural basis, then, for the western Church's view that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and* the Son, as it states in the Nicene Creed. At his baptism Jesus receives the Spirit from God. After the resurrection the disciples receive the Holy Spirit from Jesus.

But I am even more interested in something else that we can learn about the Spirit from this passage in John's Gospel. It is here that we learn what the first work of the Spirit is, what is at the top of the Spirit's list of agenda items, the Spirit's first order of business so to speak. Please notice that the initial task the newly commissioned apostles are to be engaged in is the work of forgiveness. Jesus says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." It seems that for John at least, the first work of the Spirit is the work of forgiveness.

Why is this so? What reasons might there be for the first work of the Spirit to be forgiveness? Allow me to make some suggestions. Perhaps it is because *forgiveness is such hard work*. Maybe that's why the Spirit starts there, because it takes so much effort for forgiveness to take place. Forgiveness is labor intensive, at least when it comes to our emotions.

Lewis Smedes, in his book *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve*, proposed that the forgiving of a person who has hurt you is a four-step process. It begins by having a new vision of that person, by ceasing to caricature the person only in terms of the hurt and to be able to see the person who hurt you as weak and

needy, probably stupid and surely faulty, but a person who needs you all the same.

The process of forgiveness continues as you allow that new view to become a new feeling, so that your attitude toward the person who hurt you is transformed. With the new vision and the new feeling eventually comes the miracle of being able to wish that person well. Each of these four steps requires a tremendous amount of emotional energy. They also take time. Perhaps this is why the Spirit starts work there. The sooner the process of forgiveness starts, the better. And because forgiveness is such hard work, to do it we need all the spiritual help we can get. We can't do it all by ourselves.

Perhaps the first work of the Spirit is forgiveness because it is such hard work. And maybe the first work of the Spirit is forgiveness because *it is what God wants most*. First and foremost, God may want us to receive his forgiveness and to be forgiving toward ourselves and others. We know that Jesus spent a lot of time talking about the importance of forgiveness in his teaching, and he gave the subject of forgiveness a prominent place in his model prayer. Can there be much doubt from what Jesus taught that we are to be forgiving people, because we have been forgiven by God?

Jesus not only taught forgiveness, but he modeled it himself. We recall that on the cross Jesus prayed for God to forgive those

who were crucifying him out of ignorance. In John's Gospel we have the touching account of the resurrected Christ forgiving and reinstating Peter, after the disciple had denied his Lord three times before his death. And the followers of Jesus came to realize, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that forgiveness was the purpose of the cross itself. Jesus died so that our sins might be forgiven by God. Maybe the first work of the Spirit is forgiveness, because it is what God wants most.

But maybe forgiveness is the first work of the Spirit because *it is what we need most*. We need to be forgiven. We need to be cleansed and made whole. We need to be able to start all over again. We need the new life that forgiveness makes possible. Without forgiveness, there is no way we can be rightly related to God. Forgiveness is essential, primary, critical, crucial, and indispensable to our experience of salvation.

We need most to realize we are forgiven, but then we also need most to forgive those who have hurt us in some way. Maybe that's also why forgiveness is the first work of the Spirit. Forgiveness is what we need so much to receive from God so that we can pass it along to others. *Forgiveness is meant to be shared.*

As I know you did, I held a deep respect for the late Pope John Paul II. I felt that he was a wonderful representative of the best of

Roman Catholicism. If you recall, the Pope was shot three times on May 13, 1981, while he was greeting the crowd in St. Peter's Square in Rome. Do you remember what was the first thing he did as soon as he had recovered enough from his near-fatal wounds? As the deeply spiritual individual he was, the first thing he did was to reach out in forgiveness to the man who attempted to assassinate him. Pope John Paul II also modeled what is to be the first work of the Spirit.

And who can forget the immediate spiritual response of the Amish community in Pennsylvania after a gunman walked into their school and fatally shot five girls and wounded five others? As a noted authority wrote at the time, the Amish believe their calling is to accept and absorb hostility without fighting back or falling apart. They try to take Christ at his word: Turn the other cheek and love your enemies [Donald Kraybill in *USA Today*, October 5, 2006].

Here is the question, then, that must be asked: If forgiveness is the first work of the Spirit, is it our first work as those who claim to be believers in God and followers of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit? Is forgiveness *our* first work?

To whom do we first need to offer the work of forgiveness? Perhaps it is to ourselves. Maybe we need first to offer ourselves forgiveness for failing to be the ideal self we desire so much to be. And because we are not perfect, we have made poor choices. We

need to be able to forgive ourselves for failing to be who we would like to be.

Or perhaps we need to offer forgiveness first to our spouses or our children for not living up to our expectations of them. Or maybe we need to offer forgiveness first to our parents for being unable or unwilling to give us the blessing they should have, the acknowledgment that we are lovable and capable.

Perhaps we need to offer forgiveness first to our friends or colleagues who have committed either sins of commission or omission toward us, either attacking or abusing us themselves or refusing to come to our defense when others were seeking to do us harm. Or maybe we need first to offer forgiveness to members of this congregation who have not always been as loving, as considerate, as sensitive, as tolerant, as compassionate as they might have been.

Let us begin here, then, within the fellowship of this community of faith to do the first work of the Spirit. Let us live with each other as those who are forgiven forgivers. I repeat: *Let us live with each other as those who are forgiven forgivers.* In the standard communion liturgy of the church, the minister says to the congregation, "Hear the good news: Christ died for us while we were yet sinners; that proves God's love toward us. In the name of the Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!" The congregation answers back, "In

**the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!"** Then together we say, "**Glory to God. Amen.**" As we commune daily together, let us continue to be forgiven forgivers, toward ourselves and toward one another, so that we may appropriate what is the first work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ.