

"What Kind of Spirit?"
Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter
Lectionary Year A
May 1, 2011
Text: John 20:19-31
Dr. David T. Howeth

How did the Holy Spirit come into the life of the church as a whole and into the lives of the members of the church individually? Those of you who know your Bible pretty well would probably say that the coming of the Holy Spirit took place at Pentecost. Jesus had been crucified, buried, and then was raised by God on the third day. He made several appearances to his followers and engaged in the additional teaching of the disciples over a period of six weeks. Jesus then ascended into heaven, instructing his followers to go to Jerusalem and to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit. On Pentecost, as the disciples were gathered together in a room, the Spirit came upon them, appearing as tongues of fire. With the empowerment of the Spirit, the disciples were able to preach about Jesus to all the crowds gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost.

The Spirit allowed the disciples to communicate with all who were there, no matter what language they spoke. Three thousand people accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior on Pentecost as a result of the power of the Holy Spirit working through the followers of Jesus. The church was begun on that day, as new believers in Christ began to gather together for worship, study, prayer, communion, fellowship, and ministry.

All of this is the story that Luke tells us about the coming of the

Holy Spirit in the first couple of chapters of the book of Acts. We know this story so well that we assume that things happened in precisely this way. That's why we refer to Pentecost Sunday as the birthday of the church and understand the whole season of Pentecost to be related to the church's growth and development. I think we *can* assume that things happened pretty much the way Luke describes them. Luke tells us in the beginning of the first of his two-part document, what we call the Gospel of Luke, that he is attempting to write an account of the life of Jesus and of the beginning of the church that is both accurate and in consecutive order. For good reason, then, we can rely on Luke's attempt to write a somewhat historical narrative as the basis for our understanding of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

However, the Gospel of John tells a completely different story. In John, the Holy Spirit is given to the disciples prior to Jesus' ascension by Jesus himself. The way John chooses to describe it, the disciples are not following Jesus' command to wait patiently for the Spirit; they are in hiding, with the doors locked and the windows barred out of fear that what had happened to Jesus will happen to them. In John, the Holy Spirit is not expected; it comes as a surprise. In terms of when the Spirit comes and how the Spirit comes, John's account could hardly be more different than Luke's.

But I think you will see, as we look at John's account more closely, that although it differs from Luke's account *in form*, it does not differ *in content*. That is to say, while the when and how are different, the what stays the same, and it is the what we are most interested in after all. We are more concerned, as we should be, with the information John

gives us about the nature of the Holy Spirit than we are concerned with matters of chronology and methodology. What kind of Spirit is this Holy Spirit? That's the question we are most interested in asking, and John's answer to that question winds up being exactly the same as Luke's and the other New Testament writers. So let's spend a few moments this morning focusing on what John wants to tell us about the nature and character of the Holy Spirit.

The first thing we find out about the Holy Spirit from John's account is that it is Christ's Spirit. The Spirit comes from Christ; John makes that clear. Jesus himself breathes on the disciples, and they receive the Holy Spirit. There can be no doubt from John's Gospel as to the immediate source of the Spirit. It is Christ's Spirit. This passage from John is one reason why the Nicene Creed, as found in our Hymnal (No. 880), insists that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*. At his baptism Jesus receives the Holy Spirit from God. After the resurrection, the disciples receive the Holy Spirit from Jesus.

The fact that the Holy Spirit is Christ's Spirit has led one New Testament scholar to refer to the Holy Spirit as the "shy" member of the trinity. By shyness, this scholar does not mean the shyness of timidity; the Spirit is certainly not timid. What is meant is the shyness of deference, the shyness of a concentrated centering of attention on another. It is not the shyness of self-centeredness, but the shyness of other-centeredness. The work of the Holy Spirit is the thoughtful honoring of Jesus Christ, just like the work of Christ is the thoughtful honoring of God the Father. The Spirit never works to bring attention to itself, but always to Christ. Thus, the Spirit is most present where

Jesus is most central. There is no being filled with the Spirit apart from believing in Jesus Christ [Bruner and Hordern, *The Holy Spirit—Shy Member of the Trinity*, pp. 11-33].

So can it be said that we are a Spirit-filled church, full of Spirit-filled members? Yes, if we, individually and as a congregation, have our lives centered in Christ. If we are following Christ, we are Spirit-filled. Jesus gives us the Spirit, as he did to his disciples, in order to do the work of Christ in the world, which work is to bring glory to God by the way we live our lives in relation to God, ourselves, and one another.

Not only do we learn in this account from John that the Holy Spirit is Christ's Spirit, we also discover from this story in John's Gospel that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of peace. The first words out of Jesus' mouth when he appears to the disciples are "Peace be with you." It is exactly what the disciples needed at that moment, peace. They were anxious and afraid, grief-stricken and confused, depressed and in despair. Their beloved teacher and friend had been cruelly crucified by the religious and political leaders, and with their master dead, they were not sure what to do. So they stayed hidden behind locked doors. There was no peace for them. But suddenly Jesus is in their midst in his resurrected state, showing them the nail prints in his hands and the wound in his side where the spear had been stuck. And more than anything else he did for them, he brings them peace after three days of doubts, anguish, and turmoil. Jesus, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, restores order again to their lives that had been thrown into chaos.

The Holy Spirit brings peace into our lives. The Spirit brings

blessed assurance and a calming confidence. The Spirit restores order to our minds and hearts. The Spirit gives us clarity of thinking and purity of feeling. The most Spirit-filled person is not the most frenzied, ecstatic, out of control person. Not at all. The most Spirit-filled person is the one who is most integrated, the most ordered, the most disciplined, the most stable and secure, the most self-controlled, the most whole and well. The Spirit of Christ brings this kind of peace to us, a peace which surpasses all understanding.

When we study carefully John's narrative, we learn not only that the Holy Spirit is Christ's Spirit and a Spirit of peace, we see clearly that the Holy Spirit is an apostolic Spirit. You are familiar with the word apostle. It comes from the Greek verb *apostello*, which means "to send out." Apostles are those who are authorized and commissioned, sent out, on a designated mission. We see in this story from John's Gospel the exact moment in which the disciples become the apostles. They become apostles when Jesus says to them, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." The sent One becomes the sending One, and the apostles become the ones being sent.

The Holy Spirit is given to these disciples in order for them to be empowered to be apostles, to be sent. The gift of the Spirit is how Jesus equips his followers to become apostles. With the power of the Holy Spirit the apostles will be able to tell others about Jesus, to do the ministry of Jesus, and to gather new believers into churches to worship God and learn Jesus' teaching. So it is with us as well. At our confirmation, when we professed faith in Christ, we were given the same gift of the Holy Spirit that the disciples were, and we were given that

same Spirit for the same reason, to be sent out into our world to represent Christ in everything we do in every place we find ourselves.

Finally, we learn from the way John tells the story that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of forgiveness. If you notice nothing else in this narrative, please notice that the very first work the newly commissioned apostles are to be engaged in is the work of forgiveness. The apostles and the church established by them are given the awesome honor and responsibility to offer forgiveness in Jesus' name. And is there anything more important to do in Jesus' name than to proclaim forgiveness?

The world is full of people carrying around a truckload of guilt and shame. Some of us are as well. There is the story of a little girl who couldn't quite understand the words of The Lord's Prayer when it was recited at church. At one point in the prayer she would say, "Forgive us our trashbaskets." How insightful the little girl turned out to be about our need for forgiveness! Guilt and shame are so crippling, so paralyzing, so debilitating, and our trashbaskets full of guilt and shame need to be emptied out on a regular basis. What is to be the church's word to a world of guilty and ashamed people? "You are forgiven. Go and sin no more." The first word of the church should be a loving word, a gracious word, an accepting word, an affirming word, a non-judgmental word, a word of forgiveness and blessing. What the world needs now, like it did in Jesus' time, is that forgiving word, and Jesus is counting on us, like he did on his apostles, to speak that word to our family, our friends, our co-workers, and our neighbors who are weighed down from the burden of guilt and shame they are carrying. Spirit-filled people are forgiving

people, people who can extend grace and mercy to everyone around them.

What a wonderful gift Christ has given us in the Holy Spirit. It is the kind of gift we need in order to be the church. We can't be the church without the Spirit. And what kind of Spirit is it? It is the Spirit of Christ, that keeps us focused first and foremost in our lives on what God has done for us in Jesus. It is the Spirit of peace, that brings order out of chaos in our lives. It is an apostolic Spirit, sending us out into our world to minister as Jesus did. And more than anything, the Spirit is one of forgiveness, allowing us to have open minds and hearts to offer to the world what it so desperately needs, the word of forgiveness that can reconcile a lost world to its loving and searching God. May we, as a church and as individuals, appropriate this gift of the Spirit in all we do, for the glory of God and for the sake of our world.