

SERMON
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Spirit Proof - Pentecost Sunday

June 4, 2017

Scripture: Acts 2: 1-9, 12-21 & 1 Corinthians 12:4-13

Gospel: John 14: 15-28

In the Christian year, Pentecost falls 50 days after Easter, and it marks the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is the beginning of the Christian church, when the disciples were able to carry out their ministries because of the Spirit. In a sense, Easter is completed by Pentecost. Without Pentecost, Easter would mean that Christ had departed, leaving behind confused and uncertain disciples, who as we know – went back to fishing. But with Pentecost, Jesus promised not to leave his disciples all alone. He promises in John 14:18

“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.”

“I WILL come to you.” When Jesus says this, he’s not just referring to appearing to them after the resurrection. He is also meaning coming to them in the form of the Holy Spirit. He promises them that the Holy Spirit will be sent to them. In verse 26, he says:

“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

So, what is the Holy Spirit? A couple of weeks ago I dropped off a questionnaire in folks’ mail folders to give you chance to reflect and ponder what this question means to you. At the beginning of the service today, you also had a chance to reflect on the question – How to do you describe the Holy Spirit? A few people in our congregation replied to this question to me by email, and I received a variety of answers:

- *It’s the feeling of comfort*
- *It’s a mysterious force that is overwhelming and powerful*
- *It’s like a teacher, giving wisdom and knowledge*
- *It’s love that we have for all humanity*

How do YOU describe the Holy Spirit? What words do **YOU** use?

(roam with microphone)

What is the Holy Spirit is a question that Jesus’ disciples also asked, when Jesus told them that he would be leaving? In Scripture, we can read many names for the Spirit including: Counsellor, Teacher, Guide, Helper – and perhaps in some translations you will find the word “friend”. In our gospel lesson, it tells us that Jesus described the Holy Spirit as “Advocate” - one that will come to “teach us” and “remind us.”

Now I suspect that when Jesus said this – his disciples were confused. I am not sure if the disciples fully understood what Jesus was talking about - I imagine that they asked themselves: “how will they experience the Spirit?”. And that’s a question that we should ask ourselves today – “How do we experience the Spirit?”

Again, some members of our congregation answered this question the following ways:

- *I get chills/shivers when I feel the presence of the Holy Spirit*
- *Once, at a friend’s funeral, the Holy Spirit filled my ears with music*
- *I feel a sense of calmness of heart and mind when praying for guidance,*
- *I experience it through the mysteries in the clouds, the laughter of a child, the joy of a baby being born*

Some of these may sound familiar to you. How do **YOU** experience the Holy Spirit? (**room with microphone**)

In the book Heart of Christianity, the author Marcus Borg talks about “Thin Places” as a place to experience the Holy Spirit – a place where “*the veil momentarily lifts and we experience God*”. A ‘Thin Place’ could be anywhere that our hearts are opened – in nature perhaps, wilderness, through music, poetry, dance or visual arts. Or perhaps our ‘Thin Place’ is in time of serious illness or grief when we feel God’s presence through His Spirit. In our Christian practices, it might be through our worship, through the anthems sung by our choir, through scripture readings, through prayer, or even through sermons.

In Acts, we are told a story of how the Holy Spirit first came to the early believers – and personally I would describe it as a frightening experience. It is described like the sound of a “*violent wind filling the whole house*” – and looked like “*tongues of fire.*” Well if you’ve ever witnessed a burning building – I think you can imagine how the experience of the arrival of the Holy Spirit was frightening. And on top of that – there were people raising their voices in all different languages. It is no wonder that the people were “*amazed and perplexed.*”

So how do we respond today?

Perhaps it is hard to say how we experience the Spirit because it is not something that we can touch or see. It requires faith, because it is not something that we can explain logically or scientifically. Jesus warned his disciples that people will not accept the Holy Spirit because they can not see Him or know Him. But it is something that we can ***‘feel.’***

Sometimes we may feel it in a gentle, reassuring way. I remember when I was backpacking through Mexico in my late 20’s. I was alone, feeling a little vulnerable as a single woman, and beginning to question why I was doing this. At that time, like most people in their early 20’s, I was also questioning everything about the Church, and I had begun to drift away from my childhood Sunday School teachings. But for some reason I still wandered into a church in Oaxaca , thinking perhaps that at least I would be safe there from the glare of the Mexican men. And in my heart, I remember that I found myself saying a silent prayer for help and

reassurance. I don't know why I was praying, because I most certainly wasn't expecting an answer. So, suddenly, when a voice called my name – Gail – you can imagine how I nearly jumped out of my skin. I thought I was hearing things. The voice of God? But, when I turned around, behind me stood some old friends that I had known from my childhood church in England. I hadn't seen them for maybe 15 years or so, and here we were, more than 5000 miles from where we all grew up. Now, you could say that it was a coincidence if you like. But a friend of mine once told me that there is no such thing as coincidences – they are all God incidences. I, still today, believe that it was the Holy Spirit that gently guided me into that church, keeping me safe, and leading me into great conversations about my faith which was the beginning of my journey back to Christ. I had experienced the Holy Spirit as a guide and as a counsellor.

Or for some of you, your experience of the Holy Spirit may be more like a torrent shaking you from a state of complacency. We all too easily get comfortable in day to day living, when suddenly something stirs us to start thinking. In my same travels, I also found myself at a Billy Graham concert in Seattle. The Spirit was most definitely in that arena, and it was just like a rushing wind, as people came forward in the 100's to seek Christ, and be stirred from their day to day complacency.

So how do you experience the Spirit? Maybe you are sitting here today and wonder if you have ever experienced God's Spirit. Well let me reassure you, it really is very simple - each one of you here is God's child, and so, each one of you has received God's Spirit. Just like a child receives life from a parent, we receive the life force of God, which is the Holy Spirit. The question that we must ask ourselves is:

Do we allow the Spirit within us to be as Jesus promised: our Counsellor, our Teacher, our Guide, and our Helper?

What is that stands in our way from allowing the Spirit to be all that Jesus promised?

How do we respond when we feel the nudging of The Spirit?

Perhaps you are comfortable in your daily routine, and you are frightened that you just wouldn't know what to say to a neighbor in need or grief.

Or perhaps we are frightened that God, through the Spirit, will ask us to step outside our comfort zone.

Or maybe you are so grounded in routine and tradition that you are frightened of change and what it might bring to you or to the Church. Last week in church, and at Hamilton Conference, we spoke about "Holy Shift" – and how are we, as a church responding to the Holy Spirit? How are we willing to change?

There are lots of new things happening here at Knox, which I believe is the work of the Holy Spirit: outreach events like Jazz Vespers, Knox Café, Get Away nights –And events like the Men's

Breakfast Group, Mustard Seeds, and Kindred Spirit evenings – events that help us develop our faith through fellowship and Spirit. I promise you that the Spirit is sweeping through Knox – you just need to ask yourselves if you are willing to be swept along with it. Some things may be new and challenging, and maybe they even make us feel a little uncomfortable, but I can assure that they are driven by the Spirit, and I invite you to embrace it even if it is different and difficult. Jesus promised us that the Spirit would be with us through the toughest of times. He reassures us not to be afraid. In verse 27, he says:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid.”

He promises us a Peace that is beyond anything else that we may experience in the world. That, my friends, is the Peace of the Spirit.

You have no doubt heard of the phrase that ‘we are only given as much in life as we can handle.’ I’m not sure if I totally agree with this statement, but I do know for sure that when you live into the Spirit, you might be challenged, guided, reminded, nudged. But you never need to be afraid. I know that I was challenged, guided and nudged when I took the step to accept God’s call into ministry – and yes, I was afraid. But I also experienced an amazing sense of peace – the Peace of the Spirit. As you leave here today, remember too not to be afraid. The Spirit of God is always with you – even in Oaxaca – so you need never feel alone – go out into the world and embrace that Spirit – and I invite you to live, laugh, dance, and sing in the Spirit.