

The Holy Spirit is God

A sermon for Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21

On this the third of the three great festivals of the Christian Church, Pentecost, you will note, if you happen to have a commercial calendar, that the calendar will likely identify Christmas and maybe Easter, but not Pentecost.

Some congregations celebrate Pentecost by asking people to wear red on that day. It's one way to make this great festival festive. The color red represents fire, and Acts 2:2-4 states that on the Day of Pentecost the disciples were gathered together. "And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind" (Acts 2:2). Note a similar word about wind and Spirit in John 3:8:

"The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit."

In Hebrew "wind" and "spirit" are the same word. The Spirit, like the wind, blows where it wills. We come back to the account in Acts: The sound which was like the rush of a mighty wind filled the house where they gathered, and: "There appeared to them tongues as of fire distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit. . . ." (Acts 3-4).

The text goes on to state that everyone spoke in his own language, but they all understood everyone else's language. That is the opposite of what is said in 1 Corinthians 14:5, namely that any speaking in tongues needs to be interpreted "so that the church may be edified."

One dictionary has thirty different meanings for the word "spirit." There is team spirit, school spirit, high spirits, a being in a vision. Other religions also talk about "spirit" and "spirits." John 4:24 states: "God is spirit."

What is spirit? What is the Holy Spirit? It goes back at least four centuries before the time of Christ. It was defined by Plato. The difference between matter and mind. Or spirit and matter. Or more recently, consciousness and matter.

First, mind and matter. It's best illustrated by a story that's probably apocryphal but could be true. It's about a philosopher at the end of the Seventeenth Century named Berkeley who said that everything is a projection of your mind, everything is what you're thinking. Samuel Johnson, the British writer who developed the first English dictionary, said: "I'll cure him of that." So Johnson walked up to Berkeley, kicked him in the shins. Berkeley responded: "I'm sure having some painful thoughts!"

The problem of mind and matter led Plato to think that everything in mind is superior to matter. And Plato talked about matter being deficient because it changes.

Today we have computer-generated virtual realities. We can enter artificial worlds and interact with them. Virtual reality games are so mesmerizing that some become addicted. Today there are even holograms that can be touched. Modern technology is affecting the way people talk about "spirit" and the problem of mind and matter.

Second, what about spirit and matter? We find this commonly among us because we live in an age of spiritual fads and with the idea that what is deeply felt is what is real. If you could just have a feeling of something, a feeling of something more than common everyday feelings and experiences, then you would know for sure.

In the 1960's Lutheran sociologist Peter Berger wrote a book, *A Rumor of Angels*. His studied how we sometimes think we can feel or see signs of divine transcendence. We think we hear the wings of angels and believe there is something spiritual going on. This kind of feeling is related to mystics and the mystic religions. If you just get away from this world of matter, you can enter into a mystic world as in Taoism and in Buddhism. We can just get beyond these categories into an experience that is no experience, which is beyond it all. That is what "spiritual experience" is about.

Finally, there is the matter of consciousness over against matter. Scientists have tried with computers to develop the equivalent of a human mind. But how do you get to consciousness? And then there's the whole understanding of the subconscious from Freud and more recently by Jung that there is a collective unconscious. How can that be created?

The famous mathematician, Kurt Gödel, talked about how if you are inside of something, you can't describe it. He brought to awareness the incompleteness of all mathematical systems because when you're inside of a system, you can't describe it. How can you describe consciousness?

We go into all of this field of mind, matter, and consciousness to say: None of this is what we are talking about when we talk about the Holy Spirit.

What is Pentecost about, this third most important festival? In the early church the people weren't disputing mind and matter. In that first creed we have outside of the New Testament, about 150 AD in Rome (called the "Romanum"), the third part of the creed was: "And the Holy Spirit." They didn't have it worked out the way we do. Nevertheless, as we look at the Pentecost texts, we can see what is meant in the Hebrew-Christian tradition in the Bible.

First of all, the Spirit is Jesus Christ. In John 7:37 it states: "Jesus stood up and said: 'He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.' He spoke about the Spirit which those who believed in him were to receive.'" That makes it

seem as if the water of life is something different than Jesus Christ. Yet, when we go back to the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, John 4:14 states: "He who drinks of the water I give will never thirst." In the story of the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:35): "I am the bread of life and I give you the water which means you'll never thirst again." Here Jesus is the living water. We should not make the distinction that there were two entirely different events: Jesus **is** living water, and Jesus **gives** living water.

The same is true if you look at the whole matter of Jesus being God. John 4:24: "God is spirit." And it goes on in that verse to say: Those who "worship the Father worship in spirit and in truth." Truth is Jesus. The Holy Spirit is God. And if we go on in the same Gospel: Jesus says: "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6).

As we confess in the Nicene Creed: "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life." In Psalm 104:30 the Spirit is the One who creates. In Genesis 1:2 it is the Spirit who brooded upon the waters and that's how things were created.

First of all, the Holy Spirit is Jesus Christ, is God.

Second, the Holy Spirit does the work of Christ. That may trouble us because we have in this whole description in John 16:7: "Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." It goes on to say that the work of the Spirit is to convince the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. That's his work. Then, most strikingly, the following verse: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (John 16:13).

This verse has led to all kinds of confusion because some people have said the Holy Spirit reveals more about what is to come. The problem really is liberal fundamentalists. This is the favorite verse of many in the mainline churches who are so liberal that it's hard to know if they are Christian at all. They use this part of the verse: "He will declare to you the things that are to come," as an endorsement of their newest causes and agendas. They take this verse and run with it: "The Holy Spirit is leading us into new things." The Holy Spirit is leading us. We have the Spirit. Who can deny it?

No, this is an abuse of the text. The Holy Spirit has the task of doing the work of Christ. If we go to the next verse (John 16:14), it reads: "He will glorify me. He will take what is mine and declare it to you." John 16:14 is the context; it establishes what John 16:13 means. The same is stated in John 15:26: "He will bear witness to me," and in John 14:26: "He will teach you all things and bring to remembrance all that I have said to you." (Note verse 26 in both chapters has the same message. Easy to remember.) The Holy Spirit has the task of bringing Christ to us. He does the work of Christ.

In the third place, the Holy Spirit brings salvation. The way to sum that up is to remind ourselves of Luther's statement in the explanation to the Third Article of the Creed:

"I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

That tells us two things. It tells us that it's hidden and it's revealed. It's hidden because it's not by my own reason or understanding. It's by faith, by that which God gives us. Not our thinking or doing. At the same time, it says, "through the Gospel." And the Gospel is very specifically that which is the Word and sacraments. The message of salvation. In Romans 10:17: "Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ." (RSV. Some modern translations attempt to play down the power of the Word in this verse.)

What the Holy Spirit does is bring salvation. He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies. He does it. He does salvation to us and for us. And that is why he is the Comforter. He is the who takes care of doing God's work because there is one God. We have a tendency to think there are three Gods. But there is one God in three persons. This is the basis for our salvation. Amen