

THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
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Welcome, everyone to Pentecost Sunday! I think I've had half a dozen opportunities to preach on this particular Sunday in twice as many years as the minister of the Stanford Memorial Church, and it's always a pleasure. That's because I get to talk about the most ignored and least understood person of the Christian Trinity, the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit has actually long been my favorite part of the Godhead, and the one that makes the most sense to me. The most sense, despite the fact that Jesus' disciples were called drunk – filled with new wine – when the Holy Spirit first came upon them.ⁱ Despite the fact that after a service here when someone told me at the door of Memorial Church that I'd preached a very good sermon, and I said that I had to give the credit to the Holy Spirit, she retorted, "Well it wasn't that good."ⁱⁱ Despite the fact that I spent a good bit of my early childhood in abject fear of the Holy Spirit because in my local church it was called the Holy Ghost.

Our baccalaureate speaker this year, Roman Catholic nun Joan Chittister, has written about the Holy Spirit in a book on the Apostles' Creed.ⁱⁱⁱ As you probably know, the creed begins with these words: "I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit." Sister Chittister explains that "If Jesus is the Breath of the Spirit, if the Spirit can work through the humanity of Jesus, then the Spirit can work through our humanity as well." Once one gets away from the now heretical idea that Jesus was only divine, and once one sees the Holy Spirit working through Jesus's common humanity with us, then we all have hope for accessibility to the divine.^{iv}

Today's gospel lesson from John^v has Jesus making clear to his disciples that after he's no longer on the earth to counsel and advise them, the Holy Spirit will come and "guide you into all the truth...and he will declare to you the things that are to come."^{vi} Other gospel writers describe the Holy Spirit variously as teacher, source of wisdom, inspirer, prophet, anointer, sealer, and stimulator of good works.^{vii} John actually has a unique view of the Holy Spirit, which in today's reading he twice refers to as the Spirit of Truth. That phrase is used only twice more in the entire Bible: once more in the Gospel of John^{viii} and once in the First Letter of John. John sees the Spirit of Truth as helping his disciples to grasp things they didn't understand when Jesus was on earth as well as being their advocate in a world that is rejecting their gospel message of how to live properly and faithfully in relation to the coming Kingdom of God.^{ix}

There's a tough and combative edge to John's Spirit of Truth interpretation of the Holy Spirit, though, which isn't emphasized in the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke or Paul. This Spirit of Truth will convict the world of its sin and set apart even other Christians who don't agree with the community around John.^x Those others will be condemned as liars, deceivers, false prophets, and even as the anti-Christ.^{xi} As it's put in the First Letter of John: "We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the Spirit of Truth and the spirit of error."^{xii}

Here I'm reminded of a book by the well-known evangelical preacher and writer, recently deceased, John Stott. It's entitled *Evangelical Truth*.^{xiii} In it he insists that church membership does not guarantee salvation; people who claim to be Christian but do not subscribe to the evangelical understanding of truth will be judged negatively by God.^{xiv} Among other things, evangelical truth includes: submission to the authority of the Bible;^{xv} accepting that Jesus sacrificially died for our sins and that we are redeemed through his blood;^{xvi} and affirming that

we each must be born again through a personal experience of divine regeneration.^{xvii} There is hope that the Holy Spirit, as Spirit of Truth, will convince the unconverted of their sin in this life, so that they can repent and cry to God for mercy while there's still time to do so.^{xviii} Authentic Christians must fight for evangelical truth in the public arena, as well as standing firm in the gospel internally themselves. That means not only proclaiming the good news of the coming of the Kingdom of God but confirming and defending it. Authentic Christians must go out and actively persuade others of evangelical truth through argument. (Quoting Stott:) "For the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, who cares about the truth, teaches the truth and bears witness to the truth."^{xix}

The Greek word translated as "truth" in the New Testament, though, has a broader meaning than either the gospel writer John or the evangelical preacher John Stott seem to give it. There are places where it means simply correspondence between words and reality. At other places it's synonymous with honesty and sincerity. It can mean reliability, validity, or trustworthiness. It can refer to what is real versus merely mythological.^{xx} Likewise, Holy Spirit has a broader meaning in the New Testament than merely the Spirit of Truth. It's imaged as wind and fire in the Book of Acts, it relates to feelings and emotions, and it gives people the ability to see visions and dream dreams.^{xxi} It's also imaged as water and connected to baptism.^{xxii} At the end of the book of Revelation the Holy Spirit joins with the church to invite anyone who wishes to taste the water of life as a gift -- hearkening back to the Bible's opening words when what's called the Spirit of God sweeps over the face of the waters as creation begins.^{xxiii}

So, how does all of this help us in a concrete way, now? What difference can and does the Holy Spirit make in our day-to-day lives? For starters, we can access what Sister Joan Chittister calls the Holy Spirit's "energizing presence among us, the life force that drives us

beyond ourselves, that whispers us into the great quest within, that makes life alive with a purpose not seen but deeply...felt even in the midst of chaos, even at the edge of despair.” She explains that “There is more than we know, there is an electric charge animating the world at every level and, most of all, within [us]...[The] Holy Spirit suffuses all of life...[The] Holy Spirit is the great anti-gravitational force that calls us out of somewhere into everywhere, that keeps us moving....”^{xxiv}

In the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament, Holy Spirit was called *ruah*, also translated as wind or breath – “the breath of God, the mighty wind that hovered over the empty waters at the beginning of life in the process of Creation.” As Chittister reminds us, these are “all feminine images of a birthing, mothering God, of pregnant waiting and waters breaking and life coming forth.” So, we can be helped by plugging into the Holy Spirit and being lifted out of the commonplace of our daily lives -- tuned into the voice of creation all around us and within us. The Holy Spirit can prod us to bring the life within all of us to creative fullness, to wholeness, to a sense of completeness.^{xxv}

The biblical scholar Marcus Borg emphasizes that experiencing God as Holy Spirit leads to an understanding of Christian life that stresses relationship, intimacy, and belonging. This is very different from imaging God as a king who rules the universe from the outside – who enforces and judges and punishes us for our sins. A monarch God is separate from us mere mortals who are his subjects; he is distant and authoritarian; he is lawgiver and judge. What becomes emphasized spiritually is sin, then feeling badly and repenting for our sins, and then hopefully being forgiven by the monarch God. The Christian life can become confused with existence at the mercy of our punitive superegos. We are never good enough. Our egos or selves are perpetually on trial, and our destiny depends on how well we perform. This modeling

of God leaves us with the finger-shaking deity of many of our childhoods and the guilt induced by not measuring up. Or, as we grow up, and as we reject this image of divinity, we may leave our religious institutions for good.^{xxvi}

This monarch God imagery is what I was suggesting earlier can bleed over into modeling the Holy Spirit as what the Apostle John calls the demanding Spirit of Truth, which is tough and combative and condemning. A quite different image of God, also biblically-based, conceives of God as the positive, creative life force that pervades the universe. Perceived as wind, the Holy Spirit cannot be seen, although its presence and effects are widely and deeply felt. It blows all around us. Within us we call it breath – the breath of life. Yoga practitioners and meditators understand the importance and the power of following the breath. So do those who engage in certain forms of contemplative Christian prayer. Moreover, when God is imaged as a hovering or brooding bird, as at the beginning of creation in Genesis, or as mother caring for her children and nurturing them,^{xxvii} as described in Isaiah,^{xxviii} it's the feelings of intimacy and compassion and love that come through.

Perceiving God primarily as Holy Spirit can lead to significantly different understandings of the world and of how we should be and act than conceiving of God as ruling monarch. First, creation can be understood as an ongoing activity, not just something that happened at the beginning of time. God as Spirit, as life force, is constantly bringing the universe into existence, moment by moment, and we're active participants in that. Second, instead of sin and its accompanying guilt being the main problems of the human condition, estrangement becomes so. If we don't take good care, we'll be estranged from ourselves, from others around us, and from the ground of our very being in the universe. This doesn't mean we're being observed and judged for a future home in heaven or hell, but instead it implies that by being separated right

now from the breath of life all around us and inside of us, we unnecessarily become estranged from the life force itself and from all of the creativity and vitality it can bring with it if only we are awake to it. Thirdly, that life force gets translated in social relations into compassion and love, so the issue is not so much violation of God's laws as betrayal of relationships. We can lose the opportunity for genuine intimacy, deep friendship, and unconditional love if we don't allow the Holy Spirit to work within us and through us. Finally, if we lose our alignment with the Holy Spirit, we put at risk our opportunities for genuine awe and wonder at creation itself. The imagery of wind and fire and water is that of basic forces of nature, and if we replace the Holy Spirit with idols like worldly power, wealth, and materialism, we can also lose the ability to appreciate the magnificence of the natural world and universe in which we participate. Worse still, we can come to see nature merely as something to be used, controlled and dominated by us, rather than respecting the interdependent web of all existence of which we are only a part.^{xxix}

So, we return to the words of Psalm 104, read earlier by Karen Snow:

O God, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures...living things both small and great... These all look to you to give them their food in due season... when you open your hand, they are filled with good things... when you take away their breath, they die and return to the dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground. May the glory of God endure forever... I will sing praise to my God while I have being. May my meditation be pleasing..."

And, in the words of the hymn we're about to sing, "Holy Spirit, come, renew us. Come yourself to make us live. Make us holy through your presence, holy through the gifts you give."^{xxx} Amen.

BENEDICTION

(The closing words are Ralph Waldo Emerson's)

Let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought;

That the Highest dwells within us...

There is deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is accessible to us...

The soul's health consists in the fullness of its reception...

When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius;

When it breathes through our will, it is virtue;

When it flows through our affections, it is love. Amen.

NOTES

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- ⁱ Acts 2:1-15.
- ⁱⁱ <http://javacasa.com/humor/sermon.htm>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph, 2006).
- ^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- ^v John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15.
- ^{vi} John 16:13.
- ^{vii} *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), Vol. 2, pp. 869-876.
- ^{viii} John 14:7; 1 John 4:6.
- ^{ix} *New Interpreter's Dictionary*, Vol. 2, pp. 877-878.
- ^x *Ibid.*, p. 878.
- ^{xi} See 1 John 2:22, 4:1-3; 2 John 7
- ^{xii} 1 John 4:6.
- ^{xiii} John Stott, *Evangelical Truth: A Persona Plea for Unity, Integrity & Faithfulness* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, pp. 58.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- ^{xx} *New Interpreter's Dictionary*, pp. 683-684.
- ^{xxi} Acts 2:1-3, 17.
- ^{xxii} See, for example, Matthew 3: 16 and Acts 2:38.
- ^{xxiii} *New Interpreter's Dictionary*, p. 859, referencing Revelation 22:17 and Genesis 1:1-2.
- ^{xxiv} Joan Chittister, *Search*, p. 162.
- ^{xxv} *Ibid.*, p. 167.
- ^{xxvi} Marcus Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), pp. 62-67, 71.
- ^{xxvii} *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.
- ^{xxviii} See Isaiah 49:15; 66:9-13.
- ^{xxix} Borg, *God*, pp. 77-79.
- ^{xxx} Brian Foley, "Holy Spirit, Come, Confirm Us" (1971).