

June 25 – I Believe in the Holy Spirit

Matthew 3:16-17

Today we look at the third person of the Trinity. After the long statement concerning the nature and life of Jesus, it seems a little disconcerting that we have just a single line for such an important part of the Trinity. The Creed affirms: *“I believe in the Holy Spirit.”* We want more details as to what this belief means, just like we got with Jesus, but instead the creed moves on to other topics.

So today we will try and unpack what these few words mean. As we begin, I need you to be aware that what I am going to share about the nature and work of the Holy Spirit will be much different from what you might hear in some Pentecostal churches where their beliefs focus almost entirely on the work of the Spirit.

To begin, when I speak about the Holy Spirit, I believe we are speaking about God’s active work in our lives; of God’s way of leading us, guiding us, forming and shaping us; of God’s power and presence to comfort and encourage us and to make us the people God wants us to be. The Spirit is the voice of God whispering, wooing and beckoning us.

Methodists believe the Spirit is at work all around us all the time through the active power of God’s grace. John Wesley used the term “Prevenient Grace.” But it is still that voice of God whispering, wooing and beckoning us.

When we talk about the Holy Spirit we need to be aware that our understanding of this part of the Trinity shifted and changed over time just as our awareness and understanding of the nature of God changed. In the Old Testament there are eighty to ninety references to the Spirit of God. In its earliest form, spirit meant that which gives each human being life, as in the story of the creation of Adam where it says God formed Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath or spirit of life. Sometimes the Spirit is clearly the source of creative and artistic gifts, as was the case with the great artisan who lived in the days of Moses and made beautiful things for God’s tabernacle as God’s Spirit gave him such abilities. Other times the Spirit was the source of wisdom and leadership conferred on others by current leaders laying hands

upon their successors. And, of course, we have the Spirit conferring superhuman strength on Sampson. These ancient images of God's presence in and around us are still part of what we mean when we say I believe in the Holy Spirit.

When we get to the prophets, the work of the Holy Spirit is beginning to be seen in a new way. We have in Isaiah the pronouncement, later quoted by Jesus, "The Lord God's Spirit is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor." Or, in Ezekiel where God says, "I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees."

By the time of Jesus, the Spirit of God was seen to be that force of God directing and empowering people to do the work of God. Compared to the Old Testament, the New Testament describes a veritable outbreak of the Spirit's work. There are over 400 references to the work of the spirit.

From the first verses of Matthew through the Book of Revelation, we have God's Spirit moving through the life and actions of Jesus and through the church. We are a Spirit-filled and directed church.

Since, through our faith and our historic faith roots in Wesley, we believe the Spirit to be active whispering to us, encouraging us and directing us as we celebrate the Holy Spirit as God's presence at work upon and within us.

Adam Hamilton, in his chapter on the spirit, asks us to stop and think about the voices that influence and shape us today. He says, "We all have voices we hear in our heads or deep down in our hearts—some good voices, some not so good. Sometimes we hear old tapes from childhood, such as a parent telling us that we are stupid or worthless or bad. Sometimes we hear voices telling us there is no reason to keep living, or that we will always feel as depressed as we feel right now. Sometimes the voices remind us of hurts others have inflicted upon us thus encouraging us to continue on a path of bitterness and resentment. If we listen to those voices our lives will go down certain paths. We will be depressed and angry and think the worst of people. We will see others in a negative light just as we view ourselves,"

There are other voices, the voice of the Spirit. We hear these voices in the Bible when we hear how Jesus spoke about our sins being forgiven, how God loves us, and we are beloved children of God. The Spirit convicts us and quickens our conscience when we are doing wrong. The Spirit, through persistent nudges, urges us to act selflessly in our care for others. The Spirit makes us long to be more than we are at the present. Paul says the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We read, across history, voices that call us to live out the fruits of the Spirit calling us to love, inspiring us to serve, and challenging us to forgive. We hear voices today asking to us care for the earth, respect all, that continue to remind us that each person is a beloved child of God.

We have to ask, which voices will we listen to? The Spirit will not force itself upon you. You can resist the Spirit. Just because we go to church doesn't mean we don't hear those negative voices. Some people of deep faith continue to let those old tapes play regularly in their lives. Adam calls these Spirit-deficient lives, a bit like someone who is sleep-deprived or nutrient-deprived. They know what the Spirit is calling them to do but they choose not to bear that fruit. But others fully welcome the Spirit in, letting it blow away those old tapes, letting its power and love fill them as they work with others. They let it convict them of past actions so they can grow in grace and bear fully all the fruits of the spirit.

Let me share one story from his book about the Holy Spirit at work in people today. "A couple of years ago a dear church member, Duane Clark, was moved to Hospice House, a hospice care center near the church. Duane had been like a grandfather to one of our other members, Jennifer Westlake, whose family had known Duane since before she was born. Jennifer was a kindergarten teacher who was also working on her master's degree at night. Jennifer's mother called her the day Duane moved to hospice, but by the time Jennifer finished class that night she was exhausted, so she decided to pray for Duane and then try to see him the next day.

In the middle of the night Jennifer was awakened. She told me, "I shot straight up in bed. There was a nudge and an overwhelming feeling that I was to go visit Duane at that very moment. It was the middle of the night, and I was tired, but the urge was

relentless. So I got in my car and drove across town to Hospice House. I arrived, and Duane's sweet wife, Melba, was asleep. So I sat next to Duane and held his hand. I told him it was OK to go, that God was going to help make his transition peaceful and that God was waiting." Jennifer went on to say that just a few minutes later, Duane's breathing changed. Melba woke up, and in the middle of the night the two of them held Duane's hands as he took his final breath. Jennifer told me, "I am so thankful for the nudge of the Holy Spirit so that I could be there when Duane passed."

What voices do you listen to? We need to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit and to invite the Spirit to be at work in us, comforting, guiding, shaping and empowering us. I believe in the Holy Spirit.