

Sermon Pentecost 5 19&20 18

Have you ever received a gift and you didn't know what it was? And you look at it and you don't want to be rude, but all you can think is, "What is this thing?" "What am I supposed to do with it?" "Do I need it?" "Do I want it?" And hopefully there's someone else in the room who might have a clue and can enlighten you so you don't feel stupid!

Of all the mysteries that we have in Christianity (and there are many), the Holy Spirit is one of the greatest – right up there with the Trinity, which we're going to talk about *next* week!

The Holy Spirit, the Holy Ghost, (that name *really* confuses people – you know, whooOoo and all that). There are so many names for him or *her* or even it, that it's kind of hard to assign a gender to something that doesn't seem to involve gender.

The Holy Spirit has been called the Author or more precisely, the "God-breather" of scripture, breathing scripture into the hearts and minds of those who recorded it. The Holy Spirit has also been called the Comforter, the Counselor, and the Advocate – even the Convicter, as in the one who convinces us of our sin (perhaps like our conscience), or the Seal, as when we are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever. The Holy Spirit has been called our Guide, and has been described as the Indweller of Believers (living within us), as well as our Intercessor, pleading our case before God. Another title is the Revealer, which is clearly connected to the title, Spirit of Truth. The Holy Spirit is known as both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ, as well as the Spirit of Life. And finally, the Holy Spirit has been called the Teacher and the Witness. These are not just titles. These are all the things the Holy Spirit does for us.

The Holy Spirit has taken on the appearance of a dove, rain, rivers, wind, holy oil, blessed wine, fire, and an angel.

Perhaps it can be said that each of us may have our own version, our own image of the Holy Spirit. This is how I perceive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is someone, a being of some sort, who is always just outside my field of vision, as if it's on my shoulder. But most significant to me, the Holy Spirit is so close I can't quite focus on it, or him, or her – too close to see distinctly, kind of blurry around the edges – but definitely there. It's as if I hold my hand right up close to my face – I can't really *see* it.

I call the Holy Spirit “our closest friend” because a close friend is an ally, a comforter, a counselor, and an advocate. Ultimately, a being that loves and cares for us that much is a *mystery*. And the Holy Spirit is, most assuredly, a mystery.

I marvel at the Holy Spirit’s introduction in our reading from Acts for today. Jesus had told the disciples he was leaving them and he promised them an Advocate, a Comforter that would come to them so they wouldn’t feel abandoned. But it’s pretty clear they didn’t know what he meant.

And then this wonderful supernatural event occurred! There’s wind and tongues of flame on their heads and they start speaking in different languages. And remember, as far as bystanders were concerned, most of the disciples were illiterate fishermen or tradesmen. “How do these guys know different languages? They’re nothing more than lowly Galileans!” And I love the conclusion of some – “Oh, they’re just drunk!”

And Peter addressed that “drunk” supposition loudly and directly: “Now just wait a minute! People of Jerusalem and Judea, these people aren’t raving drunk! It’s only 9 o’clock in the morning! We’re fulfilling a prophesy here!” And he quoted from the book of Joel, *from their own scripture*.

“God says, ‘When I pour my Spirit over everyone, your sons and daughters will prophesy, and your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams. I’m going to give my Spirit to everyone, even slaves, even *women*, and they’re *all* going to prophesy! Before I come again, I will send signs in the heavens and signs on earth: blood and fire and smoky mist. And the sun will cease to shine and the moon will look blood red. And everyone who calls on me will be saved.’”

I love it! It’s so dramatic! “We’re not drunk! O, that’s the least of what you have to look forward to! We’re filled with the Holy Spirit!”

Remember, they didn’t know who or what it was. They had to experience the Holy Spirit to know what it was.

And so do we.

Because the Holy Spirit testifies to us daily as to the reality of Jesus Christ. We just have to pay attention. The Apostle Paul understood this. He knew that all of creation, past, present, and future, is eagerly waiting for the incarnation of the Word: Jesus Christ. Paul

knew that the pain we see and experience in the world is like labor pains, pain that all of creation experiences as we await his coming.

This is hard stuff. This is hard to believe in. Isn't it?

And yet, as I've said before, what is the worth of a god you can prove empirically, scientifically, like a theorem? What is the worth of a god who appears like an idol? No, we must have faith to believe in God. We must take that "leap of faith."

And think about it, we must have faith to believe in anything or anyone we believe in. We must have faith to believe in God's love for us. I want to believe in that love. I want to have faith in that love.

The Holy Spirit teaches us how to have faith.

The Holy Spirit is perhaps closer and simpler than we know. Perhaps the Holy Spirit is not some mystical ghostly thing that wafts in and out of our lives. Perhaps the Holy Spirit is as real as a child's laugh, as the devoted gaze of a loving dog, as real as the beauty of a clear sunny morning after a stormy night. Perhaps it is as real as flowers that are determined to grow, as real as a kindness that has no logic, but seemingly comes out of nowhere. Maybe that kindness does come out of somewhere.

Then it becomes our task to recognize God in those things, to recognize God in new-found energy and joy, such as we find here with each other at Good Shepherd, and then to trust in the Holy Spirit's presence among us – daily – every moment – always there – always supporting us, forever amazing us, forever surprising us, helping us to see visions and dream dreams. I found this quote regarding the Holy Spirit from a deceased Roman Catholic Cardinal, who said, "I believe in the *surprises* of the Holy Spirit."

Yet, that doesn't mean the Holy Spirit is flashy. It doesn't necessarily have pizzazz. That's one of the Holy Spirit's surprises! It may have a quiet pizzazz.

I believe another one of those surprises is that the Holy Spirit is here with us, right now, with no magic, no hocus pocus, just willing, ever willing to be our support, our guide, our counselor, ready to walk with us, closer than close, close enough to dwell *within* us.

A Baptist minister I read from said, "God is looking for imperfect men and women who have learned to walk in moment-by-moment dependence on the Holy Spirit." I'll bet most of us could qualify! I know I'm imperfect! How about you? Can we learn "to walk in moment-by-moment dependence on the Holy Spirit"?

Think of all the gifts you've ever received. Some of them may have been mysteries. The gift of the Holy Spirit will always be a mystery to some degree. But we don't have to fully understand a gift to appreciate it and be thankful for it. A truly wonderful gift is one that keeps on giving, that continues to unfold and reveal itself. We can receive the gift of the Holy Spirit with open arms and open hearts again and again, and again and again thank God for its forever revealing surprise!