

Filled With the Spirit
John 20:19-23, Acts 2:1-21
May 11, 2008

I.

A preacher was greeting people at the door after the service was over, and an elderly lady remarked on her way out that he had given a pretty good sermon. The preacher thanked her and said that it wasn't really him, but the Holy Spirit. Without missing a beat she said, "I don't think so. If it was the Holy Spirit your sermon would have been even better."

Hopefully I can call upon the Spirit today as we celebrate both Pentecost and Mothers' Day. Pentecost comes from the Greek word, *πεντηκοστής*, meaning "fiftieth," which was an old Jewish harvest festival beginning the fiftieth day after Passover. The Christian church uses the same calculation beginning with Easter Day to celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. Mothers' Day, of course, always is on the second Sunday in May. And they coincide because Easter was unusually early this year.

The convergence of these two days is especially appropriate because we are given birth both by our Mothers and by the Holy Spirit. The first is physical and the second is spiritual. Our lives as human beings, and as Christians, are a result of one or the other.

It's also especially appropriate that we focus on the Holy Spirit today because next week is Trinity Sunday, when we talk about God in three persons as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So today's lessons enable us to give some extra attention to the Holy Spirit. This might be helpful because even though many of us believe we have an understanding of God the Father and divinity of Jesus Christ, we might be a little certain about the person and work of the Holy Spirit. So today we can get a head start.

I'm reminded of the old story about the little girl and the Holy Ghost. Holy Ghost was the term used to describe the Holy Spirit many years ago, and still is used in our Rite I services. The little girl wanted to find the Holy Ghost, and went searching in the church. Her parents noticed that she was not around, and found her in the attic. She explained that she thought the Holy Ghost might live up there.

In some ways that story can describe many of us. We can tend to keep the Holy Spirit in the attic while we worship the Father and Son. Today, however, I will ask us to think about how the Holy Spirit is essential to our worship of the Father and Son.

II.

Today, all three of our readings tell us about the Holy Spirit. John's Gospel and the reading from the Book of Acts are good places to start. And because these readings describe two different appearances of the Spirit, we should set the stage for both of them.

Before his death Jesus told the disciples he was going to leave them. What did they think this meant? Was everything going to be all over, for good? After traveling with Jesus for three years, according to John's Gospel, and after witnessing the miracles, and seeing demons cast out, and being part of the crowds and the excitement, and experiencing the charismatic force of Jesus' personality, was it just going to suddenly end? Would they all just go back to their old jobs?

No. That was not God's plan. Jesus did not come into the world just to teach and preach to the people who were alive at the time. Jesus came to reveal God to humanity for all time, and he came to make God's love known for all time. But we also know that Jesus left the world, and that's where the Holy Spirit enters the picture.

The Holy Spirit came to pick up where Jesus left off. The Spirit came to carry on in the world after Jesus ascended to heaven. The Spirit stands in Jesus' shoes. Everything that Scripture tells us about God the Father and our Lord and Savior in Biblical times is made real in our lives today through the working of the Spirit. Through the Spirit we receive Christ into our hearts. Through the Spirit we seek God's will for us. Through the Spirit the meaning of Scripture can be opened to us. With that background, let's briefly look at the two readings about the Spirit.

III.

John's Gospel was written after the Book of Acts, but describes events before it. Today's reading tells of the evening of the resurrection. Jesus had risen from the dead, but had not yet ascended to heaven. The disciples were locked in a room in fear of the Jews who opposed Jesus, and suddenly he supernaturally appeared among them. He gave them his peace, and then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Then he said that those they forgave were forgiven, and those they did not were not.

Hold this idea for a minute, because in the other reading from Acts, which described events fifty days later, the Holy Spirit came in a rushing wind like tongues of flame, and rested upon the disciples and filled them with the Spirit. And then crowds of people from at least fifteen different countries gathered to see what was happening. The disciples, no longer afraid, began speaking openly so they could be heard and understood in the native languages of those listening, even though the disciples themselves did not know those languages.

The explanation of the two appearances of the Holy Spirit is this. At the first appearance in the locked room on the evening of the resurrection, Jesus was preparing his disciples for ministry but they were not yet fully empowered to go boldly into the world. He knew they were fearful and uncertain, and he knew they were not yet ready for the work ahead.

When Jesus imparted the Holy Spirit to the disciples in that locked room, he did so to build them up and gird them for what was to come. And the authority he gave was to forgive or not. This was not the full force of the Spirit that came fifty days later at Pentecost. In fact, according to John's Gospel, Jesus already had told the disciples four days earlier that the Holy Spirit would not come until he had gone to the Father (16:7).

Thus, the event recorded in the Book of Acts, when the Spirit came in wind and flames, is what filled the disciples with their miraculous powers. This is the fullness of the Holy Spirit we seek in our lives and celebrate today. This is the Holy Spirit that can enable us, and can fill us, and can dwell within us to make Christ's love and God's will known.

IV.

So, how do we receive the Holy Spirit? What does it mean to receive the Spirit? Let's start with the beginning. I have spoken before about baptism, and how the Bible refers to both water baptism, and baptism in the Spirit (Mt. 3:11, Lk. 3:16, Acts 1:4-5, Acts 11:16).

And I have said that these are not two separate liturgies. There is only one baptism. When we are baptized here in the church with water in the name of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit enters us at that time and is sealed within us forever. That's one of the reasons we baptize infants. Something supernaturally significant happens no matter the age. The Spirit comes to dwell within us as a glowing ember, so to speak, but the Spirit has not yet begun to do anything.

The term "Baptism in the Spirit," describes something that usually happens later. It is when this glowing ember bursts into flames, again speaking metaphorically, and the Spirit fills us and shows forth through us in our lives. That is what happened to the disciples at Pentecost. For us, it also might happen in an instant, or it more likely could be an unfolding process that occurs over time as we deepen our spirituality.

Think about this example. You can drink a glass of water, and the water will be inside you. But you probably won't feel it, or have any sensation of water, and you probably would go right on doing whatever you had been doing. That's like the Spirit as an ember glowing within you. It's the Spirit we receive at baptism in the church.

But what happens when you jump in the water? Then it's different. Then the water surrounds you and you know you are wet. You're immersed. Being in the water might be the most dominant sensation you experience at the time. That's more what it's like when the Spirit takes over and shows forth through you. This is the Spirit that comes with baptism in the Spirit.

And while life in the Spirit can be wonderful and fulfilling, it is not a mysterious or esoteric thing. Don't worry if you don't feel mystically ecstatic. Don't be concerned if you don't speak in tongues. Our other reading today from First Corinthians makes it clear there are many different types of gifts we can receive through the Spirit. These are the gifts that strengthen us in our faith and help build up the church, and they are different.

But I pray that you don't disregard the Spirit; that you do not put the Spirit back in the attic. Although we all are saved when we accept Christ as our savior, we can more meaningfully live into that salvation as we are filled with the Spirit and experience God's love in that way.

Seek the Spirit. Make the Lord your first priority. Let God's will take precedence. Pray that the Spirit always will be evident in your lives. Support and strengthen each other in our community at St. Thomas. Baptism in the Spirit can occur as people grow in Christ here in the church and surrender their self-interests to God's interests. No one needs a priest to experience baptism in the Spirit, although we certainly are here to teach and pray and help.

And I could not end today without observing an important distinction. Don't just automatically assume that acting nice to each other, doing charitable works, and being a good neighbor is the same thing as living in the Spirit. Good-hearted atheists can do those things. People who do not even believe in God can be pillars of the community. What if someone asked us to name the things in our lives that are different from the lives of good, honest people who do not have faith? Would we have to think about the answer?

We, as Christians, are called to live as Christ taught and preached. We can't do it all the time. No one can. That's one reason why we have the Eucharist. But we are called to try, and the most important partner we can have as we walk along that road is the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit we know God, not as some fierce old figure with a long beard portrayed by artists, but as the giver of peace, as the source of love, and as our strength and support in good times and bad.

V.

So, today we celebrate the birthday of the church. We recognize that the Holy Spirit was poured out on individuals to bring them together as members of a new and vital Christian community. If we would continue our reading in Acts for a few verses, we would learn that three thousand people became part of the community on that first day (2:41).

We are called to receive the Spirit in the same way. Hopefully we understand that the Holy Spirit is more than a vague and undefined presence that inhabits the Book of Common Prayer on Sunday mornings. The Spirit continues in our lives as nothing less than revelations of God and our Savior, and it is only through the Spirit that we can truly know them. *Amen.*