

The Way to Life

John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15, Acts 2:1-21

May 23, 2010

I.

If we would think of our biblical readings since Easter as a drama, then the star of today's episode would be the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit has been described in Scripture and theological writings as the Advocate, Counselor, Comforter, Defender, Intercessor, and Helper. They all have about the same meaning.

And of course we also know the Spirit as the Holy Ghost, which reminds me of the little girl who was told in Sunday School that the Holy Ghost lived in the church. One Sunday she went searching for this supernatural occupant. After a while her parents realized she was not around, and found her in the attic. She said she thought the Holy Ghost might be up there.

That might describe many of us. Perhaps at times we keep the Holy Spirit up in the attic as we worship the Father and Son down here on the main floor. The Spirit sometimes is overlooked, and is more likely to be the missing person in the Trinity. We know about the Father and the Son, but the Spirit can seem more abstract.

Today, however, we focus on the Holy Spirit, and how the Spirit is essential to knowing the Father and the Son. And we can think about the Holy Spirit in two ways. One is to consider what the Spirit is. The other is to understand what the Spirit does. We will encounter this distinction again next week when we celebrate Trinity Sunday and examine all three persons of the Holy Trinity in the same way.

II.

Let's continue with this distinction between what the Holy Spirit is and what the Spirit does. The Bible mostly describes the latter because it portrays how the Spirit interacts between God and ourselves in the context of our lives here on earth. There is very little in Scripture about how the Spirit is eternally part of the Father and Son in the heavens.

Inattention to these two aspects of the Spirit can lead to misunderstandings. An example could be the preacher who saw a man who looked homeless sitting on a park bench. The preacher went over and handed him a \$20 bill and whispered, "Never despair." The next day the same man ran up to the preacher and handed him \$75. The preacher was perplexed, and the other fellow said, "You were right! Never Despair won the third race and paid 4 to 1."

The point here is that sometimes people are not who they seem to be. In the same way, the Holy Spirit might not conform to our own image of a spiritual being. We might think of the Spirit as some type of force, perhaps like in Star Wars, or as an invisible presence watching all that we do, perhaps as our parents seemed to be when we misbehaved as children.

The fact is, however, that the Spirit, like the Father and Son, is God. Trinitarian doctrine defines God as all three persons. The Nicene Creed proclaims the Spirit as the Lord, and giver of life. That means the Spirit is a divine being, co-equal with the Father and Son, eternally existing, even before creation, beyond time and space. We will hear more on this next week, Trinity Sunday.

Today's readings, however, describe what the Holy Spirit does here on earth rather than what the Spirit is in eternity. And this could be a good place for a little background on today's Gospel.

Before he died Jesus told the disciples he would leave them. What did they think this meant? Would everything be all over? After traveling with Jesus for almost three years, according to John's Gospel, and after witnessing miracles and seeing demons cast out, being part of the

crowds and 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, they would not. 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 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 picked up where Jesus left off. The Spirit carried on in the world after Jesus ascended to heaven. As Jesus' work on earth ended the Holy Spirit's work began. 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.

For example, two thousand years ago people who saw and listened to Jesus could receive him in their hearts. Today, the Spirit enables us to receive Christ into our hearts. When Jesus was alive he proclaimed God's will for us. Now the Spirit can reveal God's will for us. Jesus actually explained Scripture to his listeners. Today the Spirit can open the meaning of Scripture to us.

III.

And so, when Jesus ended his ministry, the Spirit was not far behind. It began, as we heard today, with Jesus' promise that he would not leave a void in the lives of his followers. He would send the Spirit to guide and comfort them, as well as all believers for all time. The Spirit would lead them, and lead us, in the way of truth. And truth in this sense means knowledge and acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

This raises an important point about that way of truth. The Spirit does not take over our lives whether we are ready or not. Instead, the Spirit give us the opportunity to prepare our hearts to believe the truth of Jesus' revelation of God. Acceptance of that truth, however, rests with us.

But we can be tempted to go about it the wrong way. If, on one hand, we think we can acquire the Spirit on our terms, then we encounter the danger of false piety. On the other hand, if we give ourselves to the Spirit, then we can experience God's love and grace as we receive and extend that love to others. And it's more than just a matter of perspective or semantics.

For example, what do we mean when we pray, "come Holy Spirit"? What do we mean we say we want to be filled by the Spirit? Doesn't that sound like we might be trying to get more of the Spirit into us instead of giving more of ourselves to the Spirit?

Here's the answer. The Spirit is among us now. God's Spirit is in the world, everywhere, all the time, patiently waiting for believers. We can look at creation and see the glory of God in it, and we see it because the Spirit tells us that's what it is. Without the Spirit we would not know.

But if we try to reach out and grab some of the Spirit, if we try to transfer some of the Spirit from the world to ourselves, it won't work. I have seen church workshops and small group meetings where people hoped they could leave the room with more of the Spirit than when they arrived. They hoped to increase the Spirit within themselves. That's close to the right idea, but it doesn't quite happen exactly in that way.

We cannot make the Spirit increase in us. We increase in the Spirit. We don't open the door and reach in and grab some of the Spirit. Instead we open the door, walk through it and let the Spirit grab us. When we do that we are surrendering, not acquiring. That's the key; to surrender rather than acquire; to give ourselves to the Spirit rather than trying to gather the Spirit into us.

And when we surrender the Holy Spirit will come, and we will be filled. We will experience God and be led in the way of wisdom and truth, and will know the love God has for us as his children.

IV.

We all probably have had moments when we feel the Spirit is with us. A difficult problem suddenly is resolved. A passage of Scripture takes on new meaning. Anxiety or worry is replaced by feelings of comfort or acceptance. Our faith seems stronger. A light bulb goes on, or we have one of those "eureka!" moments. Maybe we think back on an unanticipated blessing and wonder, "How did that happen?" Those moments come from living in the Spirit.

But living in the Spirit doesn't happen automatically. As believers we receive the Holy Spirit at our baptisms. That's when the Spirit takes up residence in our hearts and seals us as Christ's own forever. But it does not mean that the Spirit is immediately apparent in what we do.

Even though the Spirit enters us at baptism, it might remain on the back burner of our priorities. And for some, it can remain there indefinitely. The Spirit will not force its way upon us. It still is up to us to remove those worldly barriers that prevent the Spirit from living on our front burners, so to speak, where the Spirit can bring things to a boil and show forth in our lives.

And so Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would come, but he did not promise the Spirit would just take over, or even take the initiative. It is our responsibility through prayer, meditation, reading Scripture, and living in community here at St. Thomas to open ourselves to the Spirit and receive the divine guidance that the Spirit can make available to us.

And no matter what our situations in life, and no matter what blessings or burdens we might have, the Holy Spirit will reveal God to us and give us joy and comfort if we but ask and call upon this precious manifestation of God's grace.

In some ways the Holy Spirit is like a cell phone tower. The further we are away from the tower, the more likely our calls won't go through or will be dropped. The closer to the tower, the better the reception. If we do our best to place ourselves close to our Lord, the Spirit will ensure that our calls go through.

V.

And so we, as Christians, are called to live as Christ taught. We can't do it all the time, but we can try. And the most important partner we have is the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit we know God, not as some fierce old figure with a long beard, but as the giver of peace, as the source of love, and as our strength and support in good times and bad.

The Holy Spirit is more than some vague and undefined presence that roams around through the Book of Common Prayer on Sunday mornings. The Spirit continues in our lives as nothing less than revelation of God and the continuation of the work of our Lord and Savior. And only with the help of the Spirit can we truly know the Lord. *Amen.*