

“I Believe in the Holy Spirit”
Sermon Series on the Apostles’ Creed
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First Presbyterian Church, Winston-Salem, NC
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(Jn. 16:5-15)

Introduction.

There was a driver near the town of Viersen, Germany, who was going almost twice the speed limit when he was caught on camera with photo-radar. However, the driver was spared the fine of \$120 because a white bird obscured his face just when the picture was taken. This meant that officials couldn’t confirm who was, in fact, behind the wheel driving the car.

The local police joked about how this was clearly the result of divine intervention. A light-hearted police statement was released with the photo and suggested that perhaps “it was no coincidence that the Holy Spirit intervened” — a reference to the dove as a symbol of the Spirit of God. The police statement continued, “We have understood the sign from above and will leave the speeder in peace this time.” But the officials added, “We hope that the protected speeder likewise understands this hint from heaven and drives more appropriately in the future.”¹

That’s a pretty funny story, but who exactly is the Holy Spirit, and what is His role in the work of God in the world? This morning we consider the phrase in the Apostles’ Creed “I believe in the Holy Spirit,” and as we do so I want us to reflect on: 1) the promise of the Holy Spirit; 2) the person and work of the Holy Spirit; and 3) the power of the Holy Spirit.

I. The Promise of the Holy Spirit.

Throughout the gospel of John, there have been hints of the Holy Spirit. For example, at Jesus’ baptism we’re told that the Spirit descended like a dove and rested upon Christ (Jn. 1:32-33). When Jesus met with Nicodemus and talked about being born again, He described the Spirit as blowing like the wind. You don’t know where it comes from, and you can’t control it (Jn. 3). And when Jesus talked with the woman at the well in Samaria, He said that the Holy Spirit would be like a spring of living water welling up inside a person to eternal life (Jn. 4:24).

Then here in John 14-17 in the final teaching Jesus shared with His disciples, the Lord promised to give them the Holy Spirit. Later on after the resurrection Jesus told them, “*Don’t leave Jerusalem but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard Me speak about....But you will receive power when the Holy*

Spirit comes on you” (Act. 1:4,8).

The gift of the Holy Spirit is something Jesus promised to give His followers. It isn't something we can earn, and we don't deserve it. And much like the Christmas presents we received a couple of weeks ago, the Holy Spirit is a gift of grace. But a gift isn't useful until it is opened, is it? Is the Holy Spirit an unopened gift that remains largely unknown to you?

Oftentimes we feel powerless to change, and when we look back over the course of our lives we have to admit that we've made very little progress in becoming more like Christ. If the promise of Christmas is Immanuel – God with us, then why don't we experience His presence and power more often? Perhaps the real question is “Have I truly acted on the promise of Jesus regarding the gift of His Spirit? Am I aware of the Spirit, and have I tapped into His power?”

Many of us are like the people in the city Ephesus in the book of Acts where it says that when they were asked, “*Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?*” they answered, “*No, we have not even heard there is a Holy Spirit*” (Acts 19:2). They were unaware of this aspect of their birthright in Christ. The gift of the Holy Spirit is a present reality for every follower of Jesus Christ, and the Lord promised to give it to you if you are one of His disciples.

II. The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible says that the Holy Spirit is a person, and Jesus never referred to “it” when He was talking about the Holy Spirit. He spoke of the Spirit as “He,” because the Holy Spirit isn't a force, or a thing, but a person. Scripture says that the Holy Spirit has intellect, emotions and a will. In addition, the Bible says that the Holy Spirit speaks (Rev. 2:7), intercedes (Rm. 8:26), testifies (Jn. 15:26), leads (Acts 8:29), commands (Acts 16:6,7), guides (Jn. 16:13), appoints (Acts 20:28). He can be insulted (Heb. 10:29), grieved (Eph. 4:30), and even blasphemed (Mt. 12:31,32). Sounds like a real person to me.

In a wonderful essay on the Trinity, NT scholar Dale Bruner begins by talking about the Holy Spirit, and he says that one of the most surprising discoveries in his own study of the Trinity in the NT is what he can only call the “shyness” of the Spirit. What he means by that is not the shyness of timidity but the shyness of *deference*. It's the shyness of concentrated attention on another person. It is, in a word, the shyness of love. Bruner points out that the ministry of the Holy Spirit in John's gospel constantly seeks to draw attention not to Himself but to Jesus the Son of God. The Spirit comes in the Son's name, He bears witness to the Son, and He glorifies the Son.

When Dale teaches about the Holy Spirit, he sometimes represents the Spirit's ministry by drawing a stick figure on a whiteboard to represent Jesus. And then, to express what the Spirit does, he stands behind the whiteboard and reaches around

with one hand and points with a single finger to the image of Jesus. “Look at Him. Listen to Him. Learn from Him. And follow Him. Be preoccupied with Jesus.” That’s what the Holy Spirit is saying. This is the shyness of the Holy Spirit.

The fact of the matter is that the whole blessed Trinity is somewhat “shy” in this sense. Each member of the Trinity points faithfully and selflessly to the other in a gracious circle of love. God exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a community of greater humility, mutual submission, and loving delight than you and I can ever imagine. Dallas Willard once said, “The Trinity is a self-sufficing community of unspeakably magnificent personal beings of boundless love, knowledge and power.”

The third Person of the Trinity has been described as the active agent in the godhead, and His work pervades the pages of Scripture from the book of Genesis all the way to the end of Revelation. His divine activity extends to every aspect of creation and redemption. For example, He was present at the beginning of the world when the *ruach*, the breath of God, breathed life into the created order. He spoke by the prophets in the OT revealing the word of the Lord to the nation of Israel. He was present at the baptism of Jesus, and He equipped the Son of God for the ministry He was to accomplish.

The Spirit was also there at the birth of the Church when a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled the house and those sitting in it. Tongues of fire came upon those who were gathered there, and the disciples were energized to “turn the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). It is the Holy Spirit who applies the work of Christ to every believer and dwells within each follower of Jesus, and it is the Spirit who inspired the writers of Scripture as they wrote what would become the pages of the Bible, the Spirit-breathed Word of God.

In our passage this morning in John 16 we are given some additional aspects of the job description of the Holy Spirit, and there we learn that the Spirit has several specific responsibilities. For example, the Holy Spirit is an **Advocate**. “*Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go I will send Him to you*” (16:7). The word “Advocate” is sometimes translated in this passage “Counselor” or “Helper.” These are translations of the Greek word *parakeltos* which means “one who comes alongside.” Think of the best attorney you know sitting at the table with you in a courtroom guiding you through a trial, or a world class runner setting the pace for a race you’re running, or a boss who advocates for you to get a promotion or a raise, or a brilliant teacher who tutors you and helps you with your homework so you can do your very best in the class. That’s the idea here.

A second aspect of the Holy Spirit’s job is as a **Guide to find Truth**. “*But when He, the Spirit of Truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth*” (16:13). The Holy Spirit tells the truth, and He distinguishes between truth and falsehood. He inspired the writers of Scripture to write the Bible so that what is contained in

Scripture is, in fact, true, and Christians throughout the centuries have believed that the Bible is the only infallible rule in matters of faith and practice. Sometimes the truth is hard to hear, but God loves us too much to be dishonest with us. And the Spirit always speaks the truth in love.

A third element of the Holy Spirit's job description is as a **Moral Conscience**. *"When He comes He will convict the world regarding sin...righteousness...and judgment"* (16:8-11). Have you ever felt the Holy Spirit convict you when you've done something wrong? Apart from the work of God's Spirit we tend to think of ourselves as fairly righteous people. We think, "Hey, my good deeds outweigh my bad ones. I'm not such a bad person." The Pharisees of Jesus' day felt that way. However, the Holy Spirit works in our hearts and reveals to us that we really are sinners. And He helps us see that Jesus is our only hope of forgiveness and salvation.

And a final aspect of the Holy Spirit's job mentioned in this passage is **the Source of Spiritual Growth**. *"He will bring glory to Me by taking from what is Mine and making it known to you"* (16:14). Any spiritual growth you and I experience in the Christian life isn't the result of us being smart, insightful, or wise. It's only because the Holy Spirit has turned the lights on for us spiritually that we can grow, and we're able to see the truth of God because of the light He shines in our minds and hearts. Our progress in grace is a gift from God, and none of us should ever become prideful because of our growth in Christ. The Spirit is the source of all spiritual growth, and we should thank God whenever it happens.

There are many other matters regarding the Person and work of the Holy Spirit I could mention this morning – the gifts of the Spirit, the fullness of the Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. But we'll have to leave our consideration of those topics for a later time. This morning I've emphasized what Jesus said in the Upper Room about the Spirit being an advocate, a guide to truth, a moral conscience, and the source of spiritual growth.

III. The Power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is a powerful person, and that power is available to you and me. When Jesus met with His disciples before He was taken up into heaven after the resurrection, He told them they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. The Greek word which is translated "power" in Acts 1 is the word *dunamis*. It's from this word we get our English words "dynamite" and "dynamic." The power of God's Spirit is explosive and dynamic.

Pentecost is that time when God poured out His Spirit upon the disciples, and they spilled out into the streets, proclaiming the love of Jesus Christ to everyone. The only thing that can explain this boldness, this radical turn-around on the part of the disciples, is the power of the Holy Spirit. Just 40 days earlier they all

abandoned Jesus when He was arrested, and Peter denied even knowing Christ on three occasions. But it was the dynamic, explosive power of the God's Spirit that turned cowering disciples into courageous preachers. Each of them save one died a martyr's death for their faith in Christ.

With God's Spirit we have access to that same power source, and it can change our lives and change the world. What you and I cannot do in our own strength, we can do in the power of the Spirit. But that power is conditional. It is only as we are connected to the source of power will we be able to bring the power of God's Spirit to bear in our lives and in the world. Just like a lamp won't shine unless it's plugged into an electrical outlet, you and I have no power unless we abide in Christ and His Spirit flows through us.

How does the work of God's Spirit bring transformation in the lives of believers? How can we learn to tap into the source of power more? John Ortberg says that spiritual transformation is a long-term endeavor. It involves both God and us, and he likens it to crossing an ocean. He says some people try day after day to be good, to become spiritually mature in their own strength. That's like taking a rowboat and trying to cross the ocean on your own power. It's exhausting, and in the end it will be unsuccessful.

Others have given up on trying, and they simply throw themselves entirely on God's grace, hoping it will somehow bring about the change they need. But they are like drifters on a raft. They don't do anything. They don't work at cultivating a deeper life in the Spirit, and they just hang on and hope God that will get them there.

Neither trying hard nor drifting are effective in bringing about spiritual transformation. A better image is a sailboat, which if it moves at all, is a gift of the wind. We can't control the wind, but a good sailor discerns where the wind is blowing and adjusts the sails accordingly. Living the Christian life in the power of the Holy Spirit is like sailing. We have a part to play in discerning the winds, in the knowing the direction we need to go, and in training our sails to catch the breeze God provides. But it is the Lord who gives the power by means of His Holy Spirit.²

Conclusion.

The power of God's Spirit is available to every follower of Jesus Christ, but it's up to us to tap into this spiritual resource. We have this remarkable gift at our disposal, but it won't help us if we don't take advantage of it.

I close with this. During the Great Depression there was a ranch in Texas that came to be called "Yates Pool." It was a field that had been a sheep ranch owned by a man named Yates. During the Depression Mr. Yates wasn't able to make enough money by ranching to pay the principle and interest on the mortgage he

owed, and he was in danger of losing his ranch. With little money for food or clothes, like many other people at that time, his family had to live on a government subsidy.

Day after day as he grazed his sheep over the rolling hills of West Texas, he was worried about how he was going to pay the bills. Then one day a seismographic crew from an oil company came to the area, and they told him they thought there might be oil on his land. They asked permission to drill a well. He signed a lease contract, and they got to work.

At 1,115 feet, they struck a huge oil reserve. The first well came in at 80,000 barrels a day. Subsequent wells that were drilled were more than twice as large, and in fact, 30 years after the discovery, a government test of one of the wells showed it still had the potential flow of 125,000 barrels of oil a day.

And Mr. Yates owned it all. All that time he was living on welfare he was actually multimillionaire and didn't even know it, living in poverty. The problem? He didn't know about the incredible treasure and source of power that was there underground all along.

Many of us live in spiritual poverty when we've got everything we need at our disposal in the power of the Holy Spirit. When you say in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the Holy Spirit," do you really mean it? Then start living like the statement is true and let the Spirit empower you today. Amen.

¹ From <https://friendlyatheist.patheos.com/2019/05/29/german-police-make-holy-spirit-jokes-after-bird-gets-in-way-of-speeding-ticket/>.

² Adapted from John Ortberg, "True and False Transformation," *Leadership Journal* (Summer 2002), p. 104.