

“Spirit?”

Psalm 51:6-13; Romans 14:13-19, 15:13;
John 3:8, 14:26-27

September 27, 2015
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Last week we talked a little bit about the nature of God and the struggle with the idea of God. If you've noticed, first we talked about Jesus, then it was God the creator and sustainer who is far away. Today, I'd like to move to thinking about the Spirit. Now if God is sometimes hard for us to think about, if our society doesn't often think about God, what about the Spirit? In some ways, I feel the same. The sense of the Spirit is not among us. It's not part of our daily conversation. Outside the church, how much do we think about spirit, particularly the Holy Spirit?

The whole idea of spirit is a difficult one for us in this day and age because it's something that we can't get our hands around, we can't think about, we can't hold on to. And yet, there are lots of things in our lives that are real that we can't necessarily know or hold on to in the same way. We just read the passage about the wind—air, breath, all of those things we can't really see, although we know they are real. We see their effect. We feel the breath we take, and when we exhale. That's one of the common ways we think about the Spirit. But in our lives there are lots of things that we don't really know or see.

Maybe it's my bent, but I think about things like atoms, electrons, and particle physics things. Who has seen them? They tell us they've seen them, at least the effects, but the actual thing? We know there's something real there, but it's not something we can see in the same way that we see things on a daily basis. The idea of physical forces like gravity—do you see gravity? We see its effect and we know it's there. I always liked magnetism because you can play with magnets and do fun things. It looks like there's a force at a distance, but we can't see the force itself.

So there's some reality to things we can't see. I wonder, we have thoughts, we have a consciousness—have you seen somebody's consciousness lately? And yet, I don't think most of us would have trouble believing that we have such a thing, that we have thoughts or feelings. Have you ever seen a feeling? Well, I've seen somebody's face and realized what they must be feeling, but it's not quite the same as seeing the feeling, is it? We experience them, but we don't see them.

So as we try to think about the nature of what spirit is, I begin to think about things that we can't quite put our hands around. I think our tradition has had a little bit of that same problem. Our tradition, the reformed tradition, is Trinitarian. We believe God is three-in-one, or that the three are one. Jesus, Father, and Holy Spirit. When it comes to Holy Spirit, it seems like we want to say it's a nice concept, and let's just leave it at that because it's hard to understand. And we've also come out of a time of superstition—a time when people believed things that, after we began to study them a little bit better, just haven't turned out to be right. I think the Spirit got tainted with superstition. It began to be something that would be called superstition. In fact, I think some scientists

today would call spirit just a superstition. But we don't want to leave it there. What is spirit? What is the human spirit? How often do we talk about that? Sometimes you'll hear somebody talking about the human spirit and how we need to do things in our lives that bring about the growth of the human spirit. But sometimes it feels like those are marginalized folks.

We went to Findhorn this summer, and one of Helen's jobs was to help cook. She was with a cook who said he was brought up by atheist parents and he just got to a point in his life where he couldn't believe in atheism. He just couldn't believe it. There was more to life than that offered him, and that's why he went to Findhorn. It left me pondering a little bit. Why did he have to go to Findhorn? Why couldn't he have gone to his local church?

Sometimes I wonder if we have been so nervous about the spirit we have become a little spiritless. (De-spirited?) In fact, somebody the other day told me, "The human spirit? I'm too busy to think about that." Where is the spirit these days? Sometimes it feels like the only place we can go to find any spirits is in a liquor store.

We live a faith, we have a faith that includes a Holy Spirit. We have a spirit, and it's somehow about our lives. I don't know completely how to define spirit. I think that partly I've grown up in a world that's been pretty depopulated of spirit. I don't have a language that continues to help me talk about it. But when I think about the Holy Spirit, what I realize is that it is God's presence with us. It's the way that God comes close. God's not just out there somewhere. God's Spirit is close. God knows us, nudges us, encourages us.

Notice what Jesus says. "I give you the Holy Spirit, the Advocate." I want to talk about that word. It's nice to think about the Holy Spirit as advocate or comforter or helper. It's true, and I think that's part of what it means. But I think if we look at the Greek word that's used there, *paraclete*, it goes back to a word that means "to call to." In fact some people would say that the root words that form the word *paraclete* mean "to call oneself to one's own," or "to help one see who one is." So another way of thinking about the Spirit is as the one who comes, not just to comfort and say everything is all right, but to encourage us to move forward. The Spirit encourages us to know that there is a tomorrow, encourages us with the next step we're going to take. It feels like the word is more about the coach at half-time who comes to his team and says, "You can do it!" In fact, one of the meanings of the verb is to come alongside the soldiers and encourage them.

I wonder what we've missed as we've stayed away. I know in my life I often need that kind of encouragement. You can do it! Think about what Jesus says. He's giving us this one who exhorts, helps, and comforts to be a teacher. If I won't pay attention to him, if I don't believe he's there, if I don't think God has anything to say, if I think God's only way out there somewhere, how am I going to hear him teach me? The invitation is to allow him to teach us.

We are talking about going through this process that we call discernment. It's really listening to the Spirit so the Spirit can teach us. When we listen to what Jesus says, he says that the Spirit will change us, encourage and guide us. In fact, I think it's in the Romans passage where it says, "The kingdom of God is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." That's a pretty wonderful thing—righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Then it goes on to say that by the power of the Holy Spirit, we abound in hope.

So I guess, it's kind of this conundrum with me that I have this background of life that I bring, and then I encounter this thing that suggests that I haven't had it quite right. I need to learn a language I don't have. I need to open my heart and my mind in a way that I have not fully done to the hope that is offered through the power of the Holy Spirit.

What I'm doing is inviting us again into the wonder of who God is, one who is present with us, the Holy Spirit who is speaking into our lives, who is a helper and encourager and motivator, teaching us the way of Christ that we might live in the kingdom of God—righteousness, peace and joy—that we might abound in hope. Amen.