

## *Getting Acquainted with the Spirit*

Proverbs 8: 19-31    John 16: 5-15

Having celebrated Pentecost, we find the disciples in a new state of being with the coming of the Holy Spirit. Yet, of the three persons of the Trinity – this is Trinity Sunday – we would soon realize that we know very little about this manifestation of the one God's presence as the Holy Spirit.

We have an account of what happened to the disciples in the upper room, their experience of a blowing wind and something like tongues of fire among them. We heard last week how the reaction to their speech must have drawn claims of drunkenness based on what Peter said. The account may have been redacted or edited by Luke. It seems that everyone was speaking in languages that were clearly known by onlookers. Speech in a different language is rarely mistaken for drunkenness. However, if it was speaking in tongues, technical term glossolalia, then it could easily be mistaken for drunkenness. In other events in the book of Acts, Luke has made no effort to conceal the record of people speaking in tongues when the Spirit came upon them. Yet, there are plenty of other accounts when the Spirit comes and there is no speaking in tongues.

To shorten the discussion, we find a variety of different things happening in the book of Acts, forcing the conclusion that we can't discern a clear pattern to account for the presence of the Spirit. Consider the timing of baptism: the Spirit can come without baptism, leading to Peter summarily baptizing on group. Or the baptism can occur and there is no mention of the Spirit being present or manifest. Finally, there is something called 'baptism in the Spirit,' and we frankly don't know what that's all about. Our lack of clear indication has not prevented some of our sisters and brothers in the faith, like Pentecostals, from declaring that they know *exactly* what happened and what you need to experience in order to participate in a saved life, or something like that.

Leaving the book of Acts, when we consider the writings of Paul and others in the New Testament, we recall memorably what happened in Corinth and how that community became divided over manifestations of the Spirit; some felt it elevated them above others. Paul went to considerable lengths to deny any spiritual superiority. He explained the variety of gifts and how those gifts should be valued in their ability to build up and strengthen the whole community of faith.

It gets worse when we look at the gospels because the best we get there is Jesus talking about the coming of the Holy Spirit, but nothing about speaking in tongues, gifts of healing, or anything even remotely like it. Thanks, Jesus!

We would do better to look at how Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit and how Jesus' tradition in Judaism identified this aspect of God's presence with God's people.

We know that Jesus has spent a major portion of his ministry seeking to teach his disciples his way, the Kingdom way, of God's promise of new life for all. If Jesus had

been a public school teacher today, he probably would have been fired based on the aptitude of his students at the end of the course. The disciples were notorious for neglecting and misinterpreting the things that Jesus had been teaching them. His students had a tendency to fall flat on their face more often than not, and their ability to be effective witnesses of Jesus' ministry appears highly doubtful.

In John 16, as Jesus is giving his final discourse to his disciples, he seems to admit in several places that his students are not yet ready for rigors of his ministry. He begins our passage by saying: *But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, "Where are you going?"* This would seem to be a normal question, but these folks apparently haven't been listening. Now that's a problem.

Jesus doesn't let their failure to ask the question prevent him from answering the question that they **should** have asked, but didn't: *It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.* Jesus seems to realize that they're going to need some significant help once he's gone.

Here, Jesus gives the term *Paraclete*. "Paraclete" is the Greek word that simply doesn't translate too well. The NIV pew Bible translates it as "Counselor," but the NRSV translates it as "Advocate." It seems that Counselor is rather passive, whereas Advocate is much more active and engaged. This seems required since what the Counselor will be doing is described as a high level of engagement.

Here is what the Counselor will be doing: *And when [the Counselor] comes, [the Counselor] will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.*

Rather than counseling as we might think it, the Counselor will actually be teaching *the world*, calling *the world* to new understanding of what has happened. The Counselor will continue to teach as Jesus taught about the nature of sin as God's sees it, not what the world and tradition and corrupt teachings regard as sinfulness. It isn't about right ritual and proper offering, but about the lack of love, grace, and compassion toward each and every brother and sister.

The Counselor will also teach about righteousness, because Jesus is not forsaken by God as a blasphemer who gets cruelly crucified. Rather Jesus goes to be at the right hand of God, his Father.

Finally, the Counselor will teach about judgment because the evil attempt by worldly powers to take away Jesus' life by crucifixion gets overturned with the resurrection. The power of the rulers of the world gets exposed as weak and irrelevant by Jesus and his resurrection. So, the Counselor has a lot to do.

Clearly, the lessons that Jesus had begun with the disciples will continue as the Counselor does counseling, teaching, and advocating in Jesus' name.

In another instance of Jesus' lack of confidence in his lessons and the disciples' ability to learn them, Jesus says: *I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.*

Jesus' time in earthly ministry is drawing to a conclusion, whether the disciples are ready or not. Jesus' physical presence may depart, but his word and his spirituality and his way continue as the Advocate and Counselor and Teacher – the Holy Spirit – comes to engage in ministry with disciples who seek to pursue Jesus' way forever.

The notion of the Spirit of God as a distinct person and presence of God pops up from time to time in the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament, long before Jesus, and way long before the church develops the doctrine of the Trinity. The best, most familiar and most detailed presentation is in Proverbs 8. By exploring this passage (among others), we discover more about the legacy from his own faith on which Jesus draws his inspiration for the figure or person of the Holy Spirit.

The passage starts by asking listeners if they've actually heard Wisdom – capital W – calling out, raising **her** voice. Yes, Wisdom – the Spirit of God – is feminine; she has even been called Lady Wisdom. That draws also from the Greek where Sophia is sacred Wisdom, the feminine. That's a side of God many don't care to see. And that can do real damage to one's imaginings about the Trinity by add a female person to the three persons of God. Yeah, those Trinity synapses in your brain are just about burned out, aren't they? Good.

In the Proverbs reading, Wisdom is distressed, urgently beckoning to humanity while mortals choose other paths besides the sacred. Eugene Peterson in his common language Bible paraphrase "The Message" puts this proverb bluntly and accurately: *Right in the city square, where traffic is thickest, Lady Wisdom shouts, "You – I'm talking to all of you, everyone out here on the streets! Listen, you idiots – learn good sense! You blockheads – shape up! Lady Wisdom has an attitude.*

As people live their lives, they haven't been listening for Lady Wisdom. She could be yelling at the disciples of Jesus, both ancient and modern. Instead, everybody has been chasing vain and futile pursuits; we're all acting like blockheads.

In today's selection, we also hear how Wisdom was there in the beginning at creation. Remember how the Spirit is mentioned in Genesis; how the Spirit of God was amid the darkness and "hovering over the waters." As is stated here in Proverbs 8, the Spirit-Wisdom *predated* the creation, *predating* the dark, the deep, and the waters.

We're reminded that Spirit-Wisdom was the *master worker* in vs. 30, enabling God's design of creation to take form and substance. We note that Jesus is promising the Holy Spirit to his disciples in the same form and fashion. The Holy Spirit will be the "master worker" of God's **new creation** that comes through Jesus, through his

disciples working in ministry to advance the Kingdom. This ties in nicely with the opening to John's gospel which imitates the Genesis language of "In the beginning was the Word ...."

In the Holy Spirit, the disciples will gain the Counselor and Advocate who will empower them to challenge the world's beliefs and assumptions. The Holy Spirit will present Jesus' new ways formed in grace and peace, with justice and equity, and amid the power and promise of new life. The Counselor will uphold the disciples in the difficult times when faith gets tested and tried, when doubt and dismay afflict, and when fear and death cast their shadow. The Holy Spirit will also be the Master Worker who interprets the designs of the Father and the Son to the disciples, who strives to empower the witnesses and the ministries, who instills the bold vision that seeks the triumph of the Lord and the ways of his Kingdom in all things.

The arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost means that the ministry of Jesus will be empowered to move in the directions of his teaching and counsel among disciples in every age. Jesus knew that his teachings could only go so far with his disciples, and then with the disciples coming after them. He knew that the Holy Spirit would be the bridge between our Savior and his ongoing ministry in the world through us.

By the work and ministry of the Holy Spirit with us, we know that Jesus' teachings are not mere words on a page, but the revelation of the way of truth and new life. They are not frozen in time, artifacts of an ancient era, or dictates that require literal understanding that is oblivious to changing times and new awareness. This blessing is ours, and makes our ministry in Jesus' name empowered and vital, now as it was when Jesus was with us. Praise the Lord for this amazing gift for his disciples in every age.