

I thought that today, rather than tell the familiar story of Pentecost as I've done in two of the last three years, I'd use this time to reflect a bit on the third Person of the Trinity. Who is the Holy Spirit and why does she matter in our lives? Incidentally, I'm going to be using the feminine pronoun exclusively this morning to talk about the Holy Spirit. Both in Hebrew and in Greek, the original languages of our Scriptures, the word for "spirit," ruach or pneuma, is a feminine word. If we are going to continue to use the Trinitarian language of Father and Son, and I think we should use those descriptives as well as others, then using feminine terminology for the Third Person of the Trinity is a good reminder to us that God is beyond gender and that both male and female were created in the image of God.

Unless one has grown up in a Pentecostal or "Spirit-filled" denomination, the average 21st Century American Christian probably hasn't heard a lot of preaching about the Holy Spirit or, as she's called in the King James Version of the Bible, the Holy Ghost. That always worried me a bit when I was a child. I couldn't quite make out what God and Jesus had to do with some sort of scary ghost. There was, of course, Casper the Friendly Ghost, but that happy little cartoon character didn't seem to have much to do with church, either. Then there is the Greek word, Paraclete, which is the word translated as Advocate or sometimes Comforter in our passage this morning. I think I was old enough when I first heard a preacher say "Paraclete" not to confuse it with "parakeet," but then of course the Holy Spirit is described in the Scriptures and often depicted in art as a dove or some sort of bird, so who knows. The whole thing is really rather confusing.

But all kidding aside, we are really rather at a loss for language with which to describe the Holy Spirit. It's easy for us to talk about Jesus, who was after all a human like us, and feel like we're on safe ground. The Scriptures also give us a whole set of anthropomorphic metaphors for God the Father, "Father" being the primary one as well as King, Judge, Potter, Shepherd and a host of others. But the Scripture imagery for the Holy Spirit is full of wild and untamed things – wind, fire, a dove. That is, perhaps, appropriate, for like the wind, we do not see the Spirit, we can only observe the results of her work.

So it's proper, I think, to focus on what our slate of lectionary passages this morning tell us that the Spirit does. To begin with the oldest of the passages, Psalm 104, the Spirit is credited as the creative force of God. In referring to the magnificent variety of God's creatures on the land, in the heavens and in the sea, the Psalmist says, "When you send forth your spirit, they are created." This notion harkens back to the second verse of Genesis, which tells us, "the Spirit of God" (or, a wind from God) "moved upon the face of the waters." Creation starts with the Holy Spirit, even if we can't all agree on exactly how she did what she did or how long it took.

The prophet Joel is quoted by Peter in the sermon Luke records him giving after the miraculous events in Acts 2. Joel had warned the people of Israel that their wicked ways and disregard of God were about to catch up with them in the form of an invading army of locusts, probably a metaphor for the Assyrians who ultimately destroyed the Northern Kingdom. But Joel also delivered God's promise for a day to come in the future, when God would reach out again to God's people with blessing. "Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit." In Acts,

Peter uses those verses to explain to the astonished crowd how they have heard the disciples preaching in a variety of languages. We will probably not share in the kind of experience related in the first chapter of Acts, but there are other ways in which we can and do experience that promised power of the Spirit in our lives. The Biblical concept of prophecy, after all, has less to do with foretelling than with forth-telling; it is not telling the future but telling the truth. Remember what Jesus said in our passage from John: “This is the Spirit of truth.” We are commissioned by Jesus to go out and tell the great truth of God, that humankind is loved by the Creator, that we are called to love in return and to love our neighbor. To be touched by the Holy Spirit is to be empowered to tell that truth, to know it ourselves and to help others to know it. We, too, have dreams and visions. Consider your vision for this community of Christ; consider the dream of a vibrant campus that serves our larger community. That vision, that dream, came from loving hearts inspired by the work of the Holy Spirit. Whether or not those dreams are ever fully manifest in reality, and I believe they will be, we have already caused some in our community to reassess what they thought they knew of God’s people, while for some, we have been a welcome confirmation that the Church is a conduit of God’s love and care for all. The Spirit is poured out upon us, my brothers and sisters. She powers our dreams and she will power our speech as continue to speak the truth in love to our community.

The lectionary for today also offers two choices of readings from the epistles, both from letters written by Paul in which he touches on the work of the Spirit in the lives of Christians. According to Paul, writing to the Corinthians, it is thanks to the Spirit that we are able to recognize the truth of what Jesus taught and of who he is. “I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.” It is part of Paul’s ongoing message that the loving relationship with God available to us through Christ is not due to any merit or work on our part but is simply a gift from God, out of God’s great love for us. Just as the Holy Spirit is the creative power of God to which we owe our physical existence, so is the Holy Spirit the power which re-creates us, opening our hearts to the message of truth, which she herself continues to bring.

In Romans, Paul writes about how the Spirit confirms in us our new relationship with God. “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” I think I’ve spoken here before about how radical it must have been for Paul to use the image of adoption when writing about the Christian’s relationship with God. Adoption was virtually unknown in the Hebrew tradition and not a strong part of Greek society. But adoption was significantly practiced in the Roman Empire and Paul, a Roman citizen, knew about it. To be adopted under Roman law was to essentially erase one’s prior existence and to become as much a son of the adoptive father as any natural son. All of the rights of inheritance were given to the adopted son. The Holy Spirit works within us to enable us to experience the reality of being true children of our Heavenly Father. We are not slaves to some greater power, but Children of the Most High. The dark spirit that is so often evident in our culture would have us be afraid of many things – of the future, of the Other, of the natural end of physical life – but the Holy Spirit is not a spirit of fear. The Holy

Spirit is a spirit of belonging and of joy. The Holy Spirit reassures us that we need never be afraid because God, our Loving Parent, is always on our side.

Just as the Spirit helps us to experience the joy of being heirs of God, so the Spirit also gives us the gifts that make each of us unique but equally valuable in the eyes of God. Paul understands that followers of Christ will necessarily be a diverse lot, yet we are still unified in and by the love of God. Here in the United States, we remember this weekend those who gave their lives for our country in the civic holiday of Memorial Day, first observed after the war to determine whether the many states would remain one nation or become two or more. Paul wrote to the Corinthians about a different kind of *E Pluribus Unum*. “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;⁵ and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord;⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.⁸ To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit,⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit,¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.¹¹ All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” Truly, out of many, one. Paul’s list of spiritual gifts is hardly exhaustive. Whatever talents and innate abilities any of us possess surely come from God and are surely given by the Spirit to be brought to the Body of Christ. To remove any of us from the fellowship diminishes all of us. It’s particularly evident in a small group like ours just how much we miss when one of our number is not present.

I want to return now to our Gospel reading for the morning for two final images of the Holy Spirit. The first is that peculiar Greek word, παρακλητος. As I mentioned earlier, it has been translated as Advocate or Comforter. It has also been rendered as helper, champion, intercessor, councilor, Someone to stand by you. Commentator Chris Haslam notes, “The Greek word is derived from a verb meaning *call to one’s side*. The Latin word *advocatus* has the same meaning, but there is a distinction to be made between the Greek and Roman judicial systems. In a Roman court, an *advocatus* pleaded a person’s case for him, but a Greek *parakletos* did not: in the Greek system, a person had to plead his own case, but he brought along his friends as *parakletoi* to influence the court by their moral support and testimony to his value as a citizen.” Mostly, when I have read or heard this concept discussed, it has been from the point of view that the Holy Spirit acts as a sort of defense attorney for the Christian before the Judgment Seat of God. That’s certainly a valid approach, given all of the judicial images for God we can find in the Scriptures. But I find that a slightly different approach is actually more helpful to me and I want to share that with you all. It’s not the judgment of God that worries me. I rest on God’s love and on the promise of my adoption as God’s child. What plagues me on a day-to-day basis, where I need an advocate, is with myself. I find it all too easy in life to doubt my worth, my abilities, my value, and the dominant culture does little to help me with this. The message from the powers of the world, after all, is that I’m not really worthwhile unless I buy this, use that, wear this kind of clothes, drive that kind of car. The world’s pretty good at judging me and finding me wanting

and I don't know about y'all, but I fall into that trap far too easily. It's only when the Paraclete helps me reflect on my place in God's love that the anxiety of life doesn't nip at my heels.

But the Paraclete isn't like Linus' security blanket, either. Another commentator, William Long, helped me more fully understand why the King James Version translated this word as Comforter. "The word "comforter" to describe the Holy Spirit has an impressive pedigree," Long writes, "going back to Wycliffe's translation of John 14:6 in the 1380s, but the use of "comforter" in the 14th century is different from the way we would use the term today. That is, the word "comforter" is derived from the Latin *confortare*, which means to "strengthen with" (fortis is strength or strong). Thus, our 21st century understanding of "comfort," which we associate with anything from a nice hug to a bag of chocolate ("comfort food") really doesn't capture the essence even of Wycliffe's use of the word." To give some more modern images, the Holy Spirit is less like a nanny who pats us on the head and feeds us cookies and whispers, "there, there, you poor thing," and more like a boxer's corner man, who trains us for the contest, gives us water between rounds and shouts, "you're ready, Champ, go get 'em!"

There's something else about Jesus' conversation about the Paraclete that is important this morning. It's the reminder that God may be manifest in our understanding in three ways, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but that God is One. Jesus says, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father... The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me... I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." The Holy Spirit points to Jesus just as Jesus points to the Father. To see or experience one Person of the Trinity is to encounter all. The loving Jesus revealed in the Gospels, the empowering Spirit that we experience in our lives, the gracious Creator, all are the same God, the same truth, the same love.

In the story of Pentecost, Luke describes the Holy Spirit as "a rush of a violent wind" and as "tongues of fire." But in the Gospel which he wrote to Theophilus, he described the Holy Spirit at Jesus' baptism as descending upon him "in bodily form like a dove." Thinking of those very different attempts to describe the ineffable put me in mind of the story of Elijah found in the 19th chapter of I Kings. The prophet is in the mountains, hiding in fear from Ahab's soldiers, in despair, despite of what God has accomplished through him. To encourage him, God promises an experience of His presence. "The LORD said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper." The Lord, as you might remember, was in the whisper. Sometimes, we perceive the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives as a mighty wind, or as a fire. Those are significant, important moments. But for me, they don't come very often. More often, I experience the Holy Spirit in a quiet moment, in a still, small voice, like a dove.

I'd never had any experience with real doves until about four years ago. Then I was in a play at Taproot Theatre Company called "Heaven on Earth." I wonder if any of you saw it? It's a

wonderful script by Pulitzer Prize-winner Robert Schenkkan, who lives in the Seattle area. It's about a young man who has lost all faith, all hope, and has only anger to drive him through life. His grandmother prays constantly for him and when the image of Jesus appears on an old refrigerator in their yard, she thinks God has sent the miracle that will turn him around. But the young man only sees an opportunity to make a buck. Eventually he finds the beginnings of peace and hope, perhaps even faith, in part through the intervention of a mysterious stranger named Tom Dooley. That was my part. In one scene, Dooley miraculously or magically causes a living dove to appear and disappear. There was no miracle involved in how I made that dove appear and disappear every night, just a hard-learned and much-practiced bit of prestidigitation. OK, I take it back. The miracle was that I managed to pull it off every night. Don't ask me about how it worked – I'm sworn to secrecy. But the real joy, outside of getting to do that play, which I'd been trying to produce for years, was getting to work with the doves, trained magician's doves, loaned to us by the same magician who taught me the trick. They are so beautiful in appearance, so soft to the touch, so docile and trusting, that just to be in their presence was a gift of peace, even in my highly anxious state over the magic each night. I think that sometimes, the Holy Spirit brings peace like those doves. I think that's why Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

In 1963, Pope John XXIII wrote, "Let us, then, pray with all fervor for this peace which our divine Redeemer came to bring us. May Christ banish from the souls of all whatever might endanger peace. May Christ transform all people into witnesses of truth, justice and love. May Christ illumine with light the minds of rulers, so that, besides caring for the proper material welfare of their peoples, they may also guarantee them the fairest gift of peace. Finally, may Christ inflame the desires of all people to break through the barriers which divide them, to strengthen the bonds of mutual love, to learn to understand one another, and to pardon those who have done them wrong. Through Christ's power and inspiration may all peoples welcome each other to their hearts as brothers and sisters, and may the peace they long for ever flower and ever reign among them." Pope John knew, as did his namesake the evangelist, that the peace of Christ is one of the greatest of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father." In his going, Jesus left room for the Holy Spirit, the one who gives us both peace and power. In the Spirit, we can do greater things as the Body of Christ than Jesus did in his time on Earth. If Christ's Church truly united behind the Good News, if God's people really set about the task of pursuing God's will on Earth, just think of what we could do. With the aid of modern technology and knowledge, we could bring a word of peace to all the peoples of earth. We could end hunger and limit global poverty. We could bring an end to homelessness. We could provide cures for many of the world's diseases to millions. All of these things are possible, today, if only God's people will show the will, if only all Christians would allow the power of the Holy Spirit to flow. As we go out today, let us remember our prayer for the Holy Spirit to come into our lives. Let us open ourselves to the breath of God, to the wind and to the fire. Let us prepare to go forth as Jesus' empowered disciples on Pentecost 2007.