

Second Reformed Church, Pella  
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Acts 2:1-11

Sun. May 11, 2008

### Five Things You've Wondered About the Holy Spirit but were Afraid to Ask

Sue: Pentecost. The Holy Spirit. We know the words, the terms, but I'm not sure we really get it. For example, what is the Holy Spirit?

Sophie: The question needs to be "who" is the Holy Spirit, not what is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not an "it"—an impersonal force or vague power—the Spirit is "who" not a "what." The Holy Spirit is one of the three equal and eternal members of the Trinity, the perfect community of love within God. Just like the Creator and the Christ, the Holy Spirit is relational and loving and personable. Unfortunately, it seems we just don't have many Bible stories to help us get a warmer, fuller picture of the Spirit. Our symbols for the Spirit—wind, fire, dove—do not leave us with a very personal or loving impression. Sustainer. Advocate. Counselor. Comforter. All these are names or titles for the Holy Spirit, but almost all of them are hard to wrap our hands around, let alone our hearts.

Steve: Some of you may remember a day when we talked about the Holy Ghost, not the Holy Spirit. The Greek word is actually "pneumatōs"—like wind, breath. I suspect the change from Spirit to Ghost was an attempt to sound scary or ghoulish. That makes sense. But at least when we hear "Casper the Friendly Ghost" we recognize some sort of social being, not a hazy spirit. Casper is a he, not an it. Somehow we need to re-imagine the Holy Spirit as an engaging, social and loving being.

Sue: Maybe it would help, if we understood what the Holy Spirit does?

Sophie: Big questions deserve more than a short answer, but maybe this will help. Shirley Guthrie says that the one word we should associate with the work of the Spirit is "***new***."

- When we have new hope, when we are able to love again, when we feel the possibility of new beginnings: this is the work of the Holy Spirit.
- When our faith in Christ is new, or when it is renewed, in big or little ways, that is a work of the Holy Spirit.
- When words from the scripture that you may have heard 100 times, suddenly strike you in a fresh and meaningful way, that is a work of the Holy Spirit.
- When we have one of those moments of serenity or certainty, maybe shed a few tears or feel incredible joy—all these are the work of the Holy Spirit.
- When a stranger becomes a new friend, that is a work of the Holy Spirit.
- When friends who have had a falling-out reconcile, their newly restored friendship is a work of the Holy Spirit.
- When a new house is built by Habitat for Humanity or a new school is built in Haiti, that is a work of the Holy Spirit.
- When diplomats have a breakthrough in peace negotiations, that new peace is a work of the Holy Spirit, even if the diplomats are Hindu and Muslim.
- When there is a new discovery in cancer research, even if the scientist is an atheist, that

discovery is a work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is out ahead of us—beyond the church, where the name of Christ is not yet known—the Spirit is moving on the frontiers. The Holy Spirit makes all things new.

Steve: “New” is one word for the work of the Holy Spirit. But how about this pair of words to describe the Holy Spirit’s work: gathering and sending.

- The Holy Spirit gathers us into the church
- Gathers us together this morning
- Gathers us into relationships and commitments
- Gathers the bits and fragments of our lives to give us comfort and calm
- Gathers us around a friend in need
- Gathers us to pray
- Gathers us to feast as this table.

But the same Holy Spirit sends us

- To share and serve
- Sends us to the ends of the earth and to the person down the pew
- Sends, pushes and propels us beyond our comfort zones
- Sends us to explore and to risk, to seek and to create.
- Sends us with courage and curiosity, determination and love.

Sue: In the story of Pentecost, we are told that the disciples began to speak in other languages when the Holy Spirit came upon them. What are we supposed to make of that?

Steve: Don’t you have any easy questions? Eugene Peterson describes the gift of tongues as a “personal prayer language.” Through the Holy Spirit, some Christians pray privately in a way that is beyond language, beyond reason. In romantic love we often hear about “the words getting in the way” or our love being beyond words. Praying in tongues may be like that with God. For some of us, music and singing similarly lift us beyond our minds and make us more expressive than our own little trite vocabulary.

Sophie: But that isn’t what is described at Pentecost. There when the disciples spoke, Parthians, Medes and Elamites understood them. When the American missionary movement began in 1800’s, some missionaries were sent abroad with no language training. The assumption was that the Holy Spirit would allow them to be understood by the people they met. It didn’t work too well! The tongues at Pentecost point to the Spirit’s work of reaching across human divisions. The work of the Holy Spirit is to break down walls and unite people from all tribes and tongues, creating harmony in Jesus Christ. It is a reversal of the curse at the tower of Babel, where languages divided people. The Holy Spirit restores human communication and community.

## SONG

Sue: Still, it often seems that Holy Spirit is associated with the amazing, the wild and spectacular, maybe even the frightening. You have to admit that there are lots of unbelievable and miraculous stories in the book of Acts.

Steve: Hearing about the work of the Spirit in the early church, as recorded in the book of Acts, can certainly give us an inferiority complex. There are healings, even people raised from the dead. Prison doors are flung open. It seems routinely that 2 or 3,000 people come to faith in Christ. We don't see that sort of thing very often today. But then I read the letters of Paul to the churches in Corinth and Galatia, some of the first Christian churches. They have sex scandals, personality squabbles, petty jealousies and doctrinal divisions. These are churches I recognize, that sound all-too-familiar. We might say that the book of Acts is the "press-release" version or a wonderful photograph taken from a distance. The letters of Paul to the first churches are grass-roots versions, up-close pictures where the nitty-gritty life of the church is visible. But in both, the Holy Spirit is active, giving all sorts of spiritual gifts to believers, beyond their natural abilities, for the building up of their common life together.

Sophie: As modern people we are captive to reason and skepticism. Nonetheless, there must be times when we are surprised and stretched by the Spirit, when the Holy Spirit is beyond our little boxes. Just as a Jesus who never challenges us is probably not the true Jesus, so also the Holy Spirit should sometimes cause us to be amazed and awkward. On the other hand, let us not think that the Spirit's work is only in the wild or confusing. Think of a young couple, crazy-in-love, fawning over each other, wildly, madly in love, obsessed with passion. Then imagine a couple who have faced tragedy and routine for sixty years, but are still in love. Which is the truer expression of love? Patience, steadfastness, obedience, determination—these quiet gifts for the long haul, are also gifts of the Spirit.

Sue: What is the meaning of Pentecost for us today? What are we really celebrating?

Steve: Pentecost is both a gift and a task. First we celebrate and give thanks when realize how much the Holy Spirit has already been active and present in our lives and in our church. Today we say, "Thank you, Holy Spirit for all that you have done for me." But Pentecost is also a task, an opportunity. Today is a time for each of us to ask for renewal and re-filling by the Holy Spirit. Today is the day to seek a new Pentecost here among us. To pray for more of the Spirit's gifts in our lives. To be open, to let go, to let the Holy Spirit blow us where she will.

Sophie:

Send forth your Spirit, Lord; renew the face of the earth.  
Send forth your Spirit, Lord; renew the faith of your people.  
Kindle in us the fire of your love.  
Replace the anxiety within us with a quiet confidence.  
Replace the bitterness within us with the sweetness of grace.  
Replace the coldness within us with loving warmth.  
Replace the night within us with your gentle light.  
Replace the winter within us with your spring.  
And then, Spirit of God, send us  
That we speak your words  
That we may do your work.  
That we may love your world.

Oh Spirit, fill me now.

Oh Spirit, fill me now.  
Oh Spirit, fill me now.  
With your power, fill me.