

Sermon: October 24, 2021

“Nothing Else Makes Sense”

Written by: Rev. Jessica M. Townsley

Scripture: Acts 3:1-10, John 4:4-26

When you grow up church hopping, there are still moments that leave an imprint, even if much of your bible learning is more like a patchwork quilt. One of those moments for me was the first time I considered that God is three-in-one. I'm not sure why it surprised me so much to hear this, probably because I couldn't imagine a being described as three distinct, yet united names. Father. Son. Holy Spirit. I had learned about God, the one this church called, "The Father," and I had heard plenty about Jesus, but I had heard much less about the mysterious "Holy Ghost" or Spirit, depending on which translation you read.

I sat in that class, baffled by this Trinitarian proposition, and wondered about this elusive Holy Spirit. What is it, and why does it matter to me as a person who claims to be a Christian? I left that Sunday School class with my friend not knowing what the heck was happening and how it was I was supposed to go on with such a big question mark hanging over my head. It was hard to understand God as Creator of all things, but I could sort of get it. It was easier to understand Jesus as a person, but difficult to wrap my head around him as fully human *and* fully divine. And now, now they hit me with God as an invisible Spirit, which is alive and active in the world and in me.

You know, it strikes me now, looking back, how much we ask of children when we push them to commit their lives to Jesus. Notice there that I said "push," not encourage, because so many churches push their kids and

prod them. Bend and twist them to fit a mold that is like all others, rather than teaching, encouraging, and loving them into the faith and family of God. We ask a lot of children when we push them into belief. You'll notice that I tend to take a gentler approach—I try to teach first about the love of God, encouraging the kids to ask questions and to share their thoughts. Teaching is a primary job of a pastor—Jesus, after all, was called Rabbi, which means “teacher.” Faith leaders, whether they are clergy like me, or lay leaders, like those who lead so effectively and forthrightly in this church, are there to teach. Not push. Not force. Not coerce.

I could not be persuaded to just leave my questions alone and, so, as the consummate student, when I didn't get the answers I wanted in Sunday school, eventually I went looking for my own.

What *is* the Holy Spirit and why does it matter to me as a person who claims to be a Christian? I'd wager that there are many grown-ups who still don't know what that really means and the rest of us, though we have some idea, spend a lifetime learning how to do it. We're now in week three of our Apostle's Creed series, and this week, we are talking about the line that reads, “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” Compared to what we learn about God, the Creator, and about Jesus in this creed, it's interesting that the Holy Spirit section is a simple one-liner without any elaboration. And so the question returns to us, what *is* the Holy Spirit and why does it matter to me?

The New Testament uses the word Paraclete for the Holy Spirit. This is a Greek word, of course, that comes from two words: para and kaleo. Para means close, very near, or beside and kaleo is where we get the word “call.” Adam Hamilton tells us more about the word paraclete. He says this

was a word used in some legal circles for the defense attorney, an advocate for the defendant, one who “stands by the accused.” So we see that, in some translations of scripture, the word Advocate used. But paraclete has other uses as well: in some places, a paraclete is one who “comes alongside people who are hurting, to hold and comfort them.” And so, this word is sometimes translated as “comforter” or “helper.” (Hamilton, *The Creed*, p. 85-86)

In the first week, we talked about God as the one in whom we have our very being, the one who created all that is and was and is to come. Last week, we talked about how Jesus showed us “the clearest, sharpest, most abundant picture... of the face of God... because Jesus is what we know in our hearts God must surely be: compassionate, just, merciful, loving, and on the other side of every boundary.” Jesus gives us the best idea of what God’s will for us is.

This week, we are talking about the presence of God that lives within and among us. After I read the scriptures each week, we say a little response, “For the word of God in scripture, for the word of God among us, for the word of God within us...” Thanks be to God. When we read scripture, we imagine that God is present in the reading of those words to help us understand more clearly what they mean for us today. When we gather each week in worship, we try to be so present in the moment that we can sense the spirit moving among us. And when we think about how God is alongside us individually, we envisage that the Spirit of the living God does, in some way, live within us—the force that is guiding us, molding us into who God wants us to be. The presence with us in our lowest moments. The

one who empowers us to rise above our baser human instincts and act toward a vision of the Kingdom of God.

Sister Joan Chittister tells a story about her own confirmation in the Roman Catholic Church in which the priest asked the confirmands, “Why are you a Catholic?” This was a question that wasn’t in their book—it was trickier than the others they had been asked and so there were a few wrong answers. They weren’t Catholics because it was the one, true faith. They weren’t Catholics because they believed in Christ. They weren’t Catholics because they wanted to get into heaven. Sister Joan thought about it a little longer and said, “Because I was born Catholic.” This, as it happens, was the answer he was looking for. “You are Catholic because you were born Catholic,” the priest said, “And now you will receive confirmation, and the Holy Spirit will be in you, showing you what that means for the rest of your life.”

Sister Chittister writes a few paragraphs later that “Being Christian is not a Catechism, it’s a learning process, a testing of the circumstances outside ourselves against the spirit that is inside ourselves.” “Indeed,” she writes, ‘God creates us, Jesus leads us’ and the Spirit shows us ways that are not always in the book.” (*In Search of Belief*, 160-161)

When we think about our own denomination, the United Church of Christ, we might think about the blending several Protestant traditions, including the Evangelical and Reformed Church as well as the Congregational Christian Churches. We might think about our Open and Affirming program in which churches learn how the love of God reaches beyond the boundaries of what we are comfortable with and teaches us to love and affirm all of God’s children, straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, cis or

transgender, no matter who they are or how they identify, they are welcome with God and in those churches. But, what we also think about, or at least what I think about, is the tagline we are so known for, “God is still speaking.” There are many churches that think that God spoke once for all in the collection of books we have in the protestant cannon of the Bible and that was it. God isn’t still speaking; God already spoke. But as we will talk about more in a few weeks, we believe that you should never put a period where God has merely placed a comma. The clearest illustration we can use to understand this is that we know the Spirit of God remains with us, moving within and among us.

Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, who wasn’t even supposed to be talking with as a Jewish man, that God is spirit and that they who would worship God, must worship in the Spirit and in truth. He commissions the disciples to go out and make more disciples and gives them the power he has, that they would go forward and heal suffering people in a broken world. We read in Acts this very day about one of them, but there are many stories about the disciples, filled with the spirit of God on the day of Pentecost, who go into the world to show people the love of God. What else can do that, but the Holy Spirit?

Sister Chittister called the Holy Spirit, the “energizing presence among us.” It is what propels us forward, whispers to us as we move onward with purpose that is not seen, but, in her words, “deeply, consciously, stubbornly felt even in the midst of chaos, even at the edge of despair, sounds the truth in us that we are more than we seem to be.” (*In Search of Belief*, p. 162)

She says, she believes in the Holy Spirit because “nothing else makes sense.”

It doesn't make sense that the God who created us and loved us enough to come to us in the person and teachings of Jesus Christ, who redeemed our souls and showed us a better way, it doesn't make sense that that same God would simply abandon us after he has ascended to heaven. Either the Spirit is alive and active among and within us, or God really isn't God.

You know, in church and even outside of it, we spend so much time talking about God as Creator and Jesus Christ as the Way, but we spend far less time talking about God as Spirit when God as Spirit is the most lively and active part of the Godhead both in the church and out in the wide, wonderful, terrifying world. We see the work of the Spirit in the church as it has changed and shifted and grown and shrunk and spread all over the world. We see the work of the Spirit in the people who, though they believe differently than we do and maybe have never even heard of the God we worship, still embody Christian values.

C.S. Lewis, himself once wrote, “There are people in other religions who are being led by God's secret influence to concentrate on those parts of their religion which are in agreement with Christianity, and who thus belong to Christ without knowing it” (*Mere Christianity*). As a Christian with many wonderful friends who do not believe in a Christian God, but who nonetheless display the love and affirmation of all people as well as the commitment to justice and peace Christ so stressed and lived into, I must believe that this is the movement of something much greater than any of us can understand—the movement of the Holiest of Holies, the God who is Spirit who we worship in truth. In the words of Sister Chittister, nothing else

makes sense to me. To claim that God as Spirit isn't moving and working and speaking and changing things in our world today is to claim that God has abandoned us. It is to put limits on God that no human being should rightly do. It is to place God in a box, the walls of which are our own incomplete, finite, human, imperfect understanding. It isn't the opposite of humility, to claim that we know all that can be known about God in scripture and that God is speaking nowhere else is hubris, my friends. I don't know about you, but I'm not comfortable with a limited God. The God I believe in, the God I worship in Spirit and in truth is one who is limitless. One whose love and justice and mercy know no bounds. One who is alive, and active, dynamically moving throughout all that is and was and ever will be, creating and recreating the world day after day after day.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, yes. I believe in the Holy Spirit because just as Sister Chittister said, "Nothing else makes sense." God is still with us as Spirit, still operating in our world within and among us, or God is not who we think God is. When I stand up here each and every Sunday, I pray to God that the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart would be acceptable to God and that the Spirit of God would move beyond the words I speak, stirring the hearts of all who are here today to worship in Spirit and in truth to action. To greater love. Greater mercy. Greater justice. I have to believe that the Spirit is alive and active, because without that, I wouldn't be able to do this. I have all my life lived with sometimes crippling anxiety—the only way I could be up here speaking to you today is by the grace of God and the movement of the Holy Spirit. Each week, on faith, I get up here and hope that the Spirit is among us because ultimately, nothing I say matters. God as Spirit is how we have faith at all. God as Spirit is how we are

prompted to do all the good we do. God as Spirit is how we remain a church. “The Holy Spirit, Sister Chittister writes, “suffuses all of life, calls us into the mystery that is God, reminds us of the model that is Jesus, and brings us into the fullness of ourselves” (p. 162). And so, we will end with a prayer. We will say come, Holy Spirit, come: bring us into the fullness of ourselves and into God’s blessed will for us, as individuals and as a community. Amen.