

## Holy Spirit: Person or Power?

My reflections this morning spring first of all from an unexpected talk with a woman on a gravel road in the mountains of Colorado, and second, from a letter written by another woman in response to one of my sermons. I mentioned the first encounter in the *Newsletter* most of you received last week: how one evening, high up on a hill overlooking the Crystal River Valley near Carbondale, four of us in the family decided to stroll down a remote country road while we watched one of the most spectacular sunsets we had ever seen. As we talked about it, we came to a cabin, tucked back in thick scrub oak, where we saw three other people standing in their yard, amazed as we were by the sunset. Their four Scotties barked frantically at our two Golden Retrievers, and when that settled down, we all said Hello and began to talk. After a few minutes a middle-aged woman walked over to me and said, “You don’t remember me, but I’m So-and-So, and I took two of your classes at Wichita State years ago.”

I had a hard time believing it: an ex-student, both of us almost 700 miles from our homes, meeting each other by chance so far back in the woods that it takes an intricate map to get there. My family claimed, in hindsight, to have picked up signs in the lady’s face and tone that I was about to be clobbered, but in my happy surprise at running into an ex-student under such unlikely circumstances, I gave her the opening she needed, and asked what the courses were. She said she wasn’t sure about the title of one of them, but the other was the

“Bible as Literature” course, and with a hardening face she told me in no uncertain terms that my approach to Scripture in that class was totally wrong and that she had disagreed with almost everything I said.

I was in far too good a mood that evening to mind being put on the defensive, so I smiled and reminded her that on the first day of class I always told students they did not have to agree with what I said, or their assigned supplemental reading, so long as they kept them both in mind just long enough for the final exam. When I suggested to her that we have several hundred different Christian denominations because intelligent and honest people have differed in their interpretations of the Bible, she made it clear that she was guided by the Holy Spirit, and that anyone else truly guided by the Holy Spirit would understand the Bible in the same way she did. To the great relief of my family, whose plans for the evening had not included a theological confrontation, I had just barely enough sense to resist asking her to define the Holy Spirit — which in my own lifetime of constant Bible study I have never quite figured out. Instead, I remarked on the beauty of the sky, expressed my pleasure at having seen her again, and escaped what experience has taught me is a hopeless debate.

I was still caught up in processing her comment, with its remarkable ramifications, when I got back home and read a letter from a woman I have never met at all — a woman who had received from a friend of hers a tape of one of my sermons and had decided to save the friend, if possible, from my mistaken theology.

She took exception to much of what was said in the sermon, suggesting that my errors came from lack of knowledge and recommending that no matter how high the credentials of a teacher of the Bible people should always take what is said “before the Holy Spirit for understanding.” It sounds good. I wish I knew exactly what it meant. Think of the time and money seminary students could save if instead of listening to lifelong Bible scholars and reading hundreds of books they could call on the Holy Spirit to provide an answer to difficult Biblical questions.

For the two women I have just mentioned, the phrase “Holy Spirit” means an actual entity, a person, the third person of a Triune Godhead — a doctrine which took some four centuries to develop in the early church, and which — quite frankly — is about as difficult to explain as any doctrine in Christendom, especially the part which involves what is called the Holy Spirit. If you are inclined to doubt this, I would ask you to stop by our church library downstairs and check out Volume 2 of the Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, where 13 pages of the most densely-packed analysis you are ever likely to read attempts to explain it. What that excellent theological dictionary makes clear is that the concept of a Holy Spirit has gone through a long, complex evolution from the early pages of Jewish scripture to the final pages of the Christian New Testament.

Let’s take a quick look at that development. A Hebrew word which can be translated spirit, wind or breath appears at the beginning of the Genesis story of creation. Translators are not sure which English word to

use, so in one version you read that the “spirit” of God brooded over the face of the waters, in another that “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” It would be equally accurate to say simply that God “breathed” upon the face of the primeval seas. In each case, the sense seems to be simply that the presence and power of God were felt in creation.

In ancient Hebrew thought, when someone came along with extraordinary physical strength — a kind of early Schwarzenegger or Jesse Ventura, it was not steroids or the weight room that got the credit. It was “the spirit of the Lord,” said to have entered the person. And it might have little or nothing to do with character. The old folk hero, Samson, was a murderous, womanizing lout, but his strength was described as a gift of God’s spirit.

The success of Israel’s governors and military heroes was attributed to the same source. We read that “The spirit of the Lord came upon Othniel....and he governed Israel.” Great warriors like Jephthah, David and Saul did things we would call despicable, but when they conquered Israel’s enemies it was because the spirit of God had empowered them. That indwelling presence was not even a guarantee of complete sanity. Saul was clearly a psychopath whose life ended in assisted suicide.

In those days, great teachers, or prophets, were also explained on the basis of their having this gift of the spirit. Many of the earliest ones were what are called ecstasies, acting in ways reminiscent of people who get

so emotionally wrought up at revival meetings that they shout, wave their arms, jerk convulsively, and sometimes fall down in a faint or a trance. The Bible tells us how this worked with Saul, who under the influence of the spirit stripped off his clothes, prophesied, and “lay naked all that day and all that night.” [1 Samuel].

There was even what strikes many of us as a strange notion that this power was quantifiable, that like money some of it might be transferred from the rich to the poor. It is said of Moses that he was so full of the spirit of the Lord that some could be taken away from him and given to his lieutenants. Language like this, which seems to make inspiration almost a palpable commodity, is deeply puzzling to most of us. But we do understand how people can be “inspired” to do extraordinary things which under normal circumstances they could not manage. I recall the case of a 95-pound woman, momentarily filled with the spirit of mother love, who lifted the rear end of a small car because her child was pinned beneath it. Later, even with the offer of a large sum of money, she could not repeat the performance.

There is no question that in various ways and for various reasons, people are remarkably inspired at times. Athletes, poets, musicians, authors — all of them know those inexplicable moments when they outdo themselves, are lifted above their normal abilities. When this kind of thing happens in a religious context, in

some encounter between our minds and the energy we call God, there may also be an influx of power and confidence so surprising that the religious mind can only explain it by saying the spirit of God has been at work.

We have always tended to personify abstract qualities, to create personalities who represent the qualities, and whom we can call by name. So beauty, in ancient Greek thought, became Aphrodite, and wisdom became Pallas Athene, and both goddesses were visualized in statues. I happen to believe that with the idea of a “holy spirit,” early Christians did much the same. When Jesus left them, and they no longer had a familiar face and form in their midst, they were demoralized and dispirited (a telling word!) until the birthday of the church on the day of Pentecost. On that day they sensed the presence of their departed Lord with such intensity and emotion that people watching thought they must be drunk, a charge the Apostle Peter denied with what must have been a broad, happy smile: “O, no, folks; we’re not drunk. The bars haven’t opened yet, it’s still early in the morning!”

But they *were* drunk, of course. Drunk with the conviction that somehow he was still with them. Bereaved wives and husbands have told me how strongly they have felt at times the presence of a lost mate, and how deeply it comforted them. So with the disciples of Christ that day, believing finally in his promise to be with them, believing that from that day on they would know his presence in a new and blessed way. It would be natural for them to talk more and more of this divine influence as if it were an actual person. And since they

were males writing in a highly patriarchal society, they spoke of that person as “he” or “him.” I’m sure it was inconceivable that even a “spirit” could be feminine, especially when — as happened eventually — that “Holy Spirit” became the third person of a divine Trinity.

But it must have been as difficult for them to imagine Holy Spirit as person, to visualize what “he” might be like, as it is for us to this day. Think about this for a moment: God is commonly visualized as a grand old man with a magnificent white beard, although a feminist rabbi at Hebrew Union College in New York City has recently described God as an elderly woman. In either case, we can make some kind of response because we have seen plenty of mature men and women. As for Jesus, we visualize him as a young man handsome or plain, blonde or dark, but in all cases recognizable as a human being. Now, I challenge you to visualize the Holy Spirit. No face, no form, nothing to help you imagine what the church decided was part of the godhead, along with Father and Son.

So, early Christian writers tried symbolism. They write that at the baptism of Jesus the skies split and the Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove. Many churches feature amateur murals of that moment — minus the split sky, which poses a much tougher challenge to a painter. But why a dove? Perhaps simply because doves are appealing and gentle enough to become symbols of peace, but the Bible does not explain the choice. One can appreciate a story the brilliant Bible scholar Dorothy Sayers used to tell about a Japanese student who could not

quite grasp the Holy Spirit part of the trinitarian formula. “Honorable Father I understand,” he said, “and Honorable son I understand. But I do not understand Honorable Bird.”

Symbolism also fills the story of the day the church was born. There is the rush of a mighty wind, suggestive of the breath (spirit) of the Almighty upon this new creation. There are “tongues of fire” that rest on each disciple, but forget any image of Hollywood special effects. This is poetic language for indicating what the mission of these disciples would be: to speak to the world, to go everywhere telling the story of God’s gift in Jesus to a world that would need some convincing.

The wind, the dove, the flaming tongues would slowly metamorphose into something else over the next three centuries, and Christian scholars would fight great battles over whether God is one, as the Unitarian says, or three, as the Trinitarians insist. Since neither side could convince the other, Christianity split....after it had used up energy that might have gone into making sick people well and homeless people housed and happier. But I’m afraid Christianity has often found it easier to argue than to heal. As for me, I am able to make sense only of an energy emanating from God, or Goodness, or Love, or whatever you choose to call the ultimate reality, and that this energy can help us survive in trying times, can alter or control personality even when everything else seems to have failed. And that energy I call the Holy Spirit, or better (for me) the spirit of holiness, or the spirit of God, or, if you prefer, simply the Mind of God absorbed into the human heart.

Does it then make any sense to talk of being filled with the holy spirit of Christ, with his spirit of love and goodness? It does for me. I have met people motivated by a variety of dispositions. Some, forexample, with a highly developed **civic** spirit — so filled with a sense of obligation to the community that their whole lives are changed by that spirit. And their attitudes are transferable. I have known people from whom, if I spent hours in intimate talk with them, I would go away full to bursting with their spirit, with all that was good and great in them. I think that's what happened with Moses and his lieutenants.

As for us, if we walk in the company of Christ, if we sing the poetry of trust in the great hymns of the church, if we bend our knees and lower our heads in prayer, and if we do these things with serious intent, there passes into us the disposition to be holy, to have the attitude of Christ, to be filled with the spirit of holiness that filled him. I do not believe it will make us all understand a difficult book in the same way, but I do think it will make us alike in how we treat other people. Holy Spirit. For me, not a person but power....the presence in one's life of the power by which Christ lived a life so compelling that the world, since Him, has never been the same.

Fill us, our beloved Lord, this day and every day, with your spirit....

the spirit of caring and of hope, of love and of justice, so that we

may rise above our natural selves and become your children. Amen.