

“The Work of the Spirit”**A Sermon for University Congregational Church****Sunday, September 6, 2020****Rev. Paul Ellis Jackson**Traditional Word

In the beginning when God created[a] the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God[b] swept over the face of the waters.—Genesis 1:1-2

22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.
--Galatians 5:22-26

Contemporary Word

“The best way to take care of the future is to take care of the present moment.”

— Thích Nhất Hạnh, Living Buddha, Living Christ

“The Work of the Spirit”

Labor Day marks the end of the summer season—and we are turning our thoughts and spirits towards a new season--autumn. Our new sermon series entitled “Be the Bridge” starts next week—we’ll be working with Latasha Morrison’s book “Be the Bridge” and we’ll explore ways in which we, as progressives Christians, might stand in the gap and be a bridge between people. Ways we might bring people together—instead of driving us apart. We have plans for modified Sunday school to re-start next week and the choir will make an appearance, we just don’t know completely what it will look like yet. Advent and Christmas are just around the corner if you can believe that! But before we depart this season of Pentecost I want to

spend a few minutes this morning further exploring our understanding of one of the most enigmatic facets of our faith: The Holy Spirit.

I believe we encounter the Spirit of God regularly—I just think that some of us are more in tune with it when it happens. Some of us encounter the spirit when we pray—others when we sing—and still others encounter something, but refuse to call it the Holy Spirit. One of my dearest friends, raised a Presbyterian (and even ordained an Elder in that church) has in recent years recanted her faith and now considers herself an agnostic, and she regularly argues with me that I have no proof of the existence of God. And I always say to her: “I have irrefutable proof, for me, that a Divine presence exists in the world. I have had too many experiences that surpass human understanding and that I can only explain as work of the Spirit.” And she usually mutters something along the lines of “Yes, there’s something there, but couldn’t it just be a collective spirit of humankind? To which I think to myself—yes, and let’s just call that God. Theology is hard work—honest theology is even harder work.

The Rev. Warren Schoeppe, a Catholic priest who has done some beautiful work on the Holy Spirit, had this to say regarding how the Spirit might work in our world: “I think the Holy Spirit, quite often, visits someone with a big, unmistakable grace because of some need that person has. By unmistakable I mean that you are convinced that it was God and not someone or something else. First of all, we suppose it is for the sake of the recipient; God is, most often, not suggesting anything further, like imitating Joan of Arc. [God] is helping at a moment of special

need or to get someone started on the life of grace.” I like that—that’s a useful way to look at the Spirit of God.

Schoeppe goes on to describe an experience he had during World War II that further instilled in him an understanding of the Holy Spirit that informed his life to its end in 2014. He writes: “In 1943, I was a Navy Seabee on the island of Guadalcanal. I was very scared, even though the big events of that island were over and only bombing was going on. I went to an open space near the mess tent, where the Catholic chaplain was seated on a folding chair, prepared to hear confessions. I knelt down in the sand and gave him a rather emotional rendition of my general confession. At my silence, the priest said a few words—maybe a sentence that fit the situation. Regardless, it was just plain, ordinary English words. At that, a pervasive calm happened within me. Not a feeling in my mind or heart or stomach, not a sensible feeling at all, yet palpable and definite. At the same time, my point of view towards my shipmates changed from judgmental to appreciation and tolerance. All this in less than one minute.

The key here for Schoeppe is that Jesus described His “peace” as a peace that the world cannot give. In 1943, war encompassed the whole Pacific; so what was the source of the peace Father Schoeppe felt? And how did it enter him? And how were the virtues of charity and purity of spirit connected to the peace? He writes: “Saying that my psyche went through a change won’t suffice to explain this event, because the peace stayed with me until the war was over; who did that?” Indeed.

We first encounter the Spirit of God in the Hebrew Bible book of Genesis. In fact, the very first thing we encounter in the Hebrew Bible is this spirit of God: In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.—Genesis 1:1-2 Wind and air are oft used metaphors for the Spirit of God. God's spirit hovered over the water—made creation possible. The Hebrew term "ruach ha-kodesh" is often used instead of God, YHWH, as this was conceived of as being something distinct—different from other manifestations of the Divine—say, a burning bush. The use of the word "ruach" here—which is Hebrew for "breath", or "wind" seems to suggest that Judaic authorities believed the Holy Spirit was a kind of communication medium like the wind. And our modern terms of respiration and inspiration have as their root, the word spirit—this idea of breath as spirit has been around for millennia.

The term Holy Spirit appears at least 90 times in the New Testament. The sacredness of the Holy Spirit to Christians is affirmed in all three Synoptic Gospels. The participation of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity is suggested in Jesus' final post-Resurrection instruction to his disciples at the end of the Gospel of Matthew "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"

While the Holy Spirit is mentioned by all three authors of the synoptic Gospels, most of the references are by the author of the Gospel of Luke--this emphasis is continued

by the same author in the Book of Acts. In fact, most modern scholars see the books of Luke and Acts as more like two volumes of the same gospel.

All of this is to say that the Holy Spirit does not simply appear for the first time at Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus, but is present in the Gospel of Luke (in 1–2) prior to the birth of Jesus.[8] In Luke 1:15, John the Baptist was said to be "filled with the Holy Spirit" prior to birth, and the Holy Spirit came upon the Virgin Mary in Luke 1:35.[8] In Luke 3:16 John the Baptist stated that Jesus baptized not with water but with the Holy Spirit; and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus during his baptism in the Jordan River.

Mark 13:11 specifically refers to the power of the Holy Spirit to act and speak through the disciples of Jesus in time of need: "Be not anxious beforehand what you shall speak: but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak you; for it is not you that speak, but the Holy Spirit."

And Paul gets into the game by giving us these beautiful words regarding the Holy Spirit in his letter to the Galatians: "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another."

So, we're Congregationalists and we usually leave dealings of the Holy Spirit to our own personal spirituality. Corporate manifestations of the Holy Spirit, such as

speaking in tongues or the laying on of hands, we leave to our more Pentecostal brothers and sisters. As faith descendants of Boston Yankees, we're loath to participate in any activity that might stray from our staid and calm worship style. And yet many find great comfort in experiencing the Divine in more tangible, physical ways. BUT--what if a work of the spirit is to remind us to not strive to live in Empire? The Imperial court is meant to be calm and staid. What if a work of the spirit is to remind us not to live into the expectations of the world? We've set the truth on fire here before—Jesus taught us that we do not have to live in the ways of the world—we might choose to follow another path—another way. The Way of Jesus. Followers of the Way of Jesus might encounter the Spirit of God regularly as they walk the path. So just what is the work of the Spirit in the world today? Is it to be the calm, still voice that reminds us to be centered—to be at peace—and to be anxious for nothing? Is it the realization that we don't have to live our lives for Empire—for keeping up appearances—for striving to attain some level of social success? Could the work of the Spirit be to fill our hearts and our lives with energy and joy? With music? With friends? With good work?

I often feel connected to the Divine Spirit when I'm engaged in creative endeavors. I feel God's presence and pleasure when I am writing music or playing music or singing in our choir. I've often said that I feel God's immense pleasure with me when I sing. I feel a deep and profound connection with God when I lose my ego and my self within a great piece of music and my own spirit soars and swoops and time stands still. Speaking of swooping and soaring....in this morning's Eagle, on the front

page there's a story about Mark Robbins, let me read a bit of it to you—it's about how, when he was a young man of 13, he once saw a black and brown bird with a slightly curved beak, and a white belly fly to the base of a tree in his neighborhood, spin upwards in a spiral, and then, with a flourish, fly back to the bottom of the tree. Thoroughly impressed and equally curious, he looked up the bird and found out it was a Brown Creeper, a tiny woodland bird that builds hammock-like nests. From that moment, he became hooked on birds.

"I've been doing this for a long time," said Robbins, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Kansas and a member of the Kansas Ornithological Society for 26 years. "I'm now 66, and it's a passion, for sure, because you can go anywhere on the planet and see birds, so that's exciting."

I love it when someone can point to that moment in their life when they realized what it is they are meant to do. What they are called to do—their vocation. Not all of us get to feel this and I believe those of us who know that we are doing what we are meant to do sense that we are working with the Spirit—not in opposition to the Spirit—we are co-creating our life with God in ways that are life-giving and useful and good.

During last Thursday's coffee with Robin and Paul a number of our participants concurred with this experience of feeling the Divine Spirit when they create. It's always difficult to talk about something as ineffable as the Holy Spirit—and often we don't even have a vocabulary from which to draw—but we feel something: Something bigger than ourselves—and something that is filling us with a sense of peace and a sense that we are doing good in the world.

What is the work of the spirit in your life? Does the work of the Spirit in your life challenge you to be a better neighbor? Do you sense a closeness to the Divine presence when you pray? When you sing? When you create something new? When you birdwatch? When you cook a meal and then break bread with your friends and family? When you travel to someplace you've never been and marvel at God's handiwork?

What is the work of the spirit in this community? Is the spirit leading us to be better neighbors? To seek justice? To walk humbly with God? To attend to this moment in ways of loving-kindness? Careful attention to what is happening right here and right now is one more way in which we might connect with the work of the Holy One. The Buddhist monk and teacher, (Tic Nhat Han) Thích Nhất Hạnh, in his book "Living Buddha, Living Christ" wrote that "The best way to take care of the future is to take care of the present moment." What if a work of the Spirit is to keep us focused on this moment—right here, right now, without being anxious for anything?

If God is love, then each act of loving-kindness is a visible manifestation of God. Each act of kindness that you participate in is then a visible manifestation of the Divine Spirit. The work of the Spirit is love and it is present in you—this love is made manifest in YOU—each time you motivate your life with loving-kindness—when you do something for someone else. When you push back against those in your life who are trying to create divisions—when you smile at a stranger—when you give a dollar to someone in need. That is love—that is a work of the Spirit.

May you go out into the world this week ready to encounter the work of the Spirit of God in all that you do and also find ways for you to be the work of the Spirit of God—when you are so led. Your acts of loving-kindness are ready to be received by the world. Be the work of the Spirit and be anxious for nothing. Amen.

RESOURCES

<https://www.liguorian.org/illustrations-holy-spirit/>

Holy Bible, NRSV