

“You Bestow Upon Us Your Holy Spirit...”

John 4:23-26 I Corinthians 12:11-26

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The Third “person” of the Trinity is perhaps the hardest for most of us to understand and speak of; yet strangely enough, it is the “person” of the Trinity that we can most directly experience. We can no longer experience Jesus the Christ, as the first disciples did. Nor can we experience God the Creator, except as God’s creation mediates it to us. No, when you get right down to it, it is God the Holy Spirit that essentially makes God the Creator and our experience of God in Christ real. As the Gospel of John puts it, **“God is spirit and those who wish to worship God must worship God in spirit and in truth.”** (John 4:24)

The Holy Spirit may be hard to pin down and define, remember Jesus said it was like the wind, coming from God knows where; but we know when the Spirit of God is present. The Spirit brings life to a new, more vital level. The Spirit brings with it a heightened sense of God active in our lives and in our world. The Spirit assures us our sins are forgiven and the grace of God is real, that a new start can be made. The Spirit helps us develop old gifts and discover new gifts that can be shared with others. The presence of the Spirit moves our prayers, bible reading, and worship beyond mere form or rote to a genuine sense of connection with God and our fellow Christians.

It is not an accident that when ancient people, whether it was the Hebrews, or the Greeks or the Romans searched for a word to us when speaking of the Holy Spirit, came up with words they used for “breath.” The Latin word *spiritus* originally meant breath. It shows up in more mundane words like respiration, expire, etc.

One of the classes I took at the University of Florida was Red Cross Lifesaving. I took it so I could work at our UCC camp. Those of you who have taken this class or taken a CPR class will remember that one of the things you are taught is how to do is how to give artificial respiration. The instructor would have us practice on plastic dummy called “Resuscitation Annie.” We would line up to blow the so called “breath of life” into her. I can still remember tilting the head back to clear the airway and blowing in and watching for the rise and fall of the rib cage.

The oldest ways of determining whether a person is alive or not is to check and see if they are breathing. It is a fact of life breath equals life. Not breathing quickly brings death. When God creates Adam in the Garden of Eden God takes lifeless clay, molds it into the shape of a man and breathes the breath of life into it. In fact in the Genesis story we are told that God created this marvelous lively creation by sending a “wind” over the formless void to bring the “web of life” into existence. Little wonder then that the ancients choose the word for “breath” to apply to their experience of God as Spirit. As Frederick Buechner puts it, “Thus spirit = breath = life, the aliveness and power of your life, and to speak of a [person’s] spirit (or soul) is to speak of the power of life that is in [them]. When the spirit of a [person] is unusually strong, the life of [of that person] is unusually alive, [they] can breathe it out into other lives, become literally in-spiring.”

(Wishful Thinking, p. 90)

This is what we experience through the life of Jesus. People experienced bubbling over of life in Jesus, so much so that they came to speak of him as the Christ, the very Son of God. Wherever Jesus went he brought the life God intended for humanity. Jesus brought physical healing to the blind, the lame, the possessed. Jesus even brought life itself to Lazarus who had died.

When Jesus spoke his words were filled with an unusual vitality and power that gave people new hope and made ancient words and rituals of faith come alive in ways people didn't think possible. More strangely still, as Jesus was taking his very last breaths on that cross, people experienced in his dying a strange life-giving quality, so much so that people still are imbued with life from that death on a cross long ago. As one hymn writer put it, "there is power, power, wonder working power in the blood, of the lamb..."

Progressive Catholic nun, Joan Chittister, in her book "*In Search of Belief*", in which she meditates on the ancient Nicene Creed, writes her own, more extended statement of beliefs at the end of the book. This is what she says about the Holy Spirit

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
The breath of God on earth,
Who keeps the Christ vision present
To souls yet in darkness,
Gives life even to hearts now blind.

Infuses energy into spirits yet weary, isolated, searching and confused.

The Spirit has spoken to the human heart
Through prophets and gives new meaning
To the Word throughout time.

That strikes me as a very good summary of the work of the Holy Spirit, in regards to individuals, to which I can say a loud "AMEN!"

We dare not stop with the way the Holy Spirit works with individuals, for one of the greatest works of the Holy Spirit is the creation of the church, the Body of Christ in the world. In the gospel of John Jesus tells the disciples he must soon leave them but Jesus promises that when he is gone the Holy Spirit will come to them and strengthen them and remind them of

all he was and taught. In the book of Acts, at the first Pentecost, the emphasis is not on the effect of the Holy Spirit on individuals present. The emphasis is on the community of faith, the building up of the community of faith and its task of spreading the Good News of God and equipping them for the Kingdom tasks.

This is where our UCC Statement of Faith chooses to put its emphasis. **“You bestow on us Your Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.”** Even before the UCC statement of faith was published it was criticized for only speaking of the work of the Holy Spirit in regards to the church. Henry P. Van Dusen, a noted theologian at the time, forcefully argued this point in the United Church Herald. He pointed out that the Holy Spirit doesn't just work within the church and that sometimes the organized church itself needs Holy Spirit endowed rebels to give the church a kick in the pants.

Certainly, there is no doubt that the work of the Holy Spirit is NOT confined to the church, no matter how broadly one defines church. The church does not have a “lock” on the Holy Spirit, as Jesus said, it blows freely wherever it wills. There is also no doubt that the church, like individuals, needs to be corrected from time to time. No church gets it right all the time. No church has all the truth. No church can escape falling into error over time. It is simply the nature of all individuals and all human organizations. While we should constantly work towards “perfection” we should never come to believe that “perfection” has been achieved.

From the very beginning the church has gotten some very important things wrong and had to experience the correction and renewing of the Holy Spirit. The church has often committed great wrongs in the name of God

and is often slow to recognize those wrongs and has to be dragged kicking and screaming by Holy Spirit endowed people and groups to the “right” actions. In the beginning the powers that be in the church fought to make all Christians, whether they were Jewish or Gentile, keep kosher and circumcise their male children. In the end the Apostle Paul won the day for the view that gentile Christians did not have to keep all the Laws of Moses to be Christian. Later the church would fall into the egregious errors of the Inquisition in Spain. Later scientific truth would be suppressed by the church in the name of God. Galileo and others were put on trial for simply saying that the earth revolved around the sun. Later the church would fall into the error of selling indulges and seeking to prevent the Bible from being translated into the common language of ordinary people. This led to Luther and others starting the Protestant churches. The list goes on and on, right down to modern times when churches are still arguing over such things as the role of women in society and the church. There is no doubt that countless people have paid a huge price, sometimes with their very lives, for the sins and errors of the church through the centuries.

There is always work for the Holy Spirit to do in the church. This why our UCC statement of faith says that “**The Holy Spirit creates and renews the church of Jesus Christ.**” Sometimes individual Christians will say, “be patient with me, God isn’t done with me yet. We can say the same thing about the church. God isn’t done with it yet. It is a work in progress. It is constantly under construction and reconstruction. The early Protestant Reformers put it this way, *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* – the church reformed, always undergoing reformation, or re-formation.

While there is no denying that the Holy Spirit can and does work with individuals, both in and outside the church, none-the-less, one of the most

important jobs of the Holy Spirit is forming a “community of faith”, locally and globally. Our statement of faith speaks of this as **“binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.”** As individual Christians we covenant with one another to worship and serve God and neighbor. We covenant with one another to help each other grow in the Holy Spirit. We covenant with each other to correct each other, to nurture faith, hope and love in each other. Paul put it this way, **“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”** (I Cor. 12:7)

As I recall my experiences of the Holy Spirit most of them have occurred when I was part of a “community of faith”: a Sunday School class or Bible study; church camp; a worship service; listening to a speaker at a church gathering; a seminary class or in the seminary dorm community; on a mission tour or project; etc. How about you? Have you experienced the power of the Holy Spirit most often when you were alone or with other people of faith? I would suggest that there is something about the very nature of the Holy Spirit, that **“once you have experienced it, you want to pass it on, and soon all those around can warm up in its glowing.”**
Amen.