

I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT  
FOURTH IN THE SERIES ON THE APOSTLES' CREED  
OCTOBER 12, 1986

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I have a thrilling message today, but how can I convey the thrill? How can I communicate the excitement of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit? The Hebrews described rather than explained. Rather than explain the existence of God, they described God's acts of creation. Rather than explain the immanence of God--the presence of God in human history and in human lives--the Bible describes the work of the Holy Spirit.

To confess through the Apostles' Creed that we believe in the Holy Spirit is to affirm and celebrate the presence of God in our midst. God is not off somewhere on a mountain top waiting for us to climb. God is not in a remote place called "heaven", waiting for us to die. God is not on a distant planet waiting for us to improve space travel. God is not hiding in an atom waiting to be discovered. God is not in a lofty idea waiting for our puny minds to understand. God is not hiding behind some mysterious liturgy waiting for us to find the proper form of worship. God is incomprehensible, yes, but God is not unapproachable. God is the process by which all things come into being and are sustained, yet God is not too busy for you. God is present to you. God will enter a relationship with you. Imagine! The God who brought the universes into being wants, seeks, even "dies" to get into a relationship with you.

If the Apostles' Creed ended after the articles about God the Father and Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, Christianity would be a barren, cold faith. We would know God as Creator and Judge. But, the heroes of the church, in their wisdom, knew that God was more. Through their worship of God, through their studying, and through fellowship with one another, they experienced God in their midst. They knew God was with them; therefore, they affirmed in the creed that God is more than creator, more than judge, more than redeemer. They affirmed that God is Spirit and, through the Holy Spirit, and as the Holy Spirit, God is present with his people.

Now, there are many spirits abroad. There is the spirit of patriotism. There are the spirits of greed and envy. There are the spirits of the dead with whom some people are in communication. There are good spirits and there are bad spirits. The river that runs through my home town has its origin in the largest lake in Minnesota which was originally named by the Indians for the Great Spirit. The early fur traders, in turn, named the river for their favorite spirit--rum. The Rum River flows through my town. There are good spirits and there are bad spirits. I do not immediately give credibility to statements that people claim to have received from spirits. We can't believe some people while they are alive; why should we believe them when they are dead!

The author of I John was emphatic in 4:1, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God." Don't trust every spiritual experience. Put it to a test and the author of I John gives us the test: (4:2,3) "Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God." The author is combatting the gnostic heresy which I mentioned in the sermon on Jesus. The gnostics could not believe or understand how Jesus could be the Christ--the Messiah--and still be a real human being. The criterion by which we test spiritual experiences is our best understanding of Jesus.

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The historical person, Jesus, is the revelation of God. Nothing that is contrary to the life and teachings of Jesus is of God. It is absolutely crucial for us to have as complete a picture of Jesus as possible. As I listen to some who speak in his name today, I find the gnostic heresy is still alive. In the conservative circles there is often a denial of the world, a denial that God so loved the world, he gave his Son. They promote a personal religion with little application to society. But, when you read the gospels, you find a Jesus who was very concerned about people, especially the poor and the disadvantaged, and very concerned about his country's imminent destruction by the Romans. The test of a genuine spiritual experience is: "Does the experience make you more concerned about the world and the suffering of people? Are you inspired to care about the hungry? Do you seek to change the wrongs of society? Are you working for peace, the saving of this planet?" Test the validity of your spiritual experience and the validity of the testimony of others by evaluating the experience according to the biblical understanding of the human being called Jesus.

According to our understanding then of Jesus, and according to the biblical description of the Holy Spirit's work, what can you expect to experience when the Holy Spirit comes upon you? When you pray, "Come, Holy Spirit," open your life to the Spirit, and wait expectantly for God to act, what might happen? Notice that you wait for God to act in God's own time, for God is neither manipulatable nor coercible; but, when the Holy Spirit acts, what happens?

First, the Holy Spirit breaks in. Often this is a dramatic event in a person's life; but, even when the break-through is not dramatic, it is radical. Lives are changed. Persons are re-oriented. The center of life is changed from self to God. Jesus used the term "born again." When the Holy Spirit breaks into your life, it is like being born again, like starting over. The image most common to the Bible is not that of persons, through meditation and prayer, discovering and freeing the God that is within them. The image most common to the Bible is a rushing wind, a hurricane, coming upon you, moving you, lifting you up, tossing you topsy-turvy, remaking you, freeing you from bondage.

The Holy Spirit frees you from bondage to your self and from bondage to other alien spirits. Paul wrote to the Galatians in 5:1, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." When the Holy Spirit is in your life, jealousy, anger, selfishness, immorality are replaced by the fruits of the Spirit which are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23) When a person becomes loving, joyful, patient and kind, there has been a radical revolution. The Holy Spirit breaks in!

Secondly, the Holy Spirit empowers you. The disciples were changed by the Holy Spirit from fearful, cowardly followers to courageous, effective leaders! When the Holy Spirit breaks into your life, you find strength to do tasks you never thought possible. You find consolation so that you can cope with poor health, job insecurity, deaths of loved ones, worries about family, etc. You receive power. You experience freedom from the demons of inadequacy, inferiority and shyness. When I look back on my life, I shake my

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head in amazement. Who would have predicted that a shy farm boy from Minnesota would some day stand in the pulpit of this church and preach the Word of God to folks like you! Of course, part of the answer is sheer audacity and stupidity; but part of it is the Holy Spirit!

When the Holy Spirit comes into your life, you find fresh courage to live your life as God intended you to live. Next Sunday is Commitment Sunday when we together, you and I, make a financial commitment to God for the sake of God's ministry through the First United Methodist Church. Some of you need the courage of the Holy Spirit to tithe, to keep 90% of your income for your needs, and give 10% to God. We are not just giving to the budget. We are giving to God. We are not just committing ourselves to the church. We are expressing our commitment to Jesus Christ through this church. It is serious business to be the body of Christ. Whether the body is crippled or healthy is our decision. Some of you tithe your income as the Bible suggests. Some of you have not yet found the faith or the courage to tithe. You have been given much to manage so that God's work can prosper. Some of you need to believe that. Do you have the courage to believe that your needs will be met when you are faithful and obedient? If you don't have the courage, the Holy Spirit can give it to you. The Holy Spirit breaks in and empowers.

Thirdly, in chapters 12-14 of I Corinthians, we read about the gifts of the spirit. The Holy Spirit gives to some the gift of wisdom; to some, faith; to some, miracles, healing; to some, the gift of tongues; some, he calls to teach; some to administrate, to lead; he calls all of us to strive for the higher gifts--faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love.

For what purpose? Often, we fail to ask this question. For what purpose does God break into your life and change you? For what purpose does God empower you? For what purpose does the Holy Spirit bestow gifts of leadership upon you? For the sake of ministry, to build up the body of Christ. Paul says it well in Ephesians 4:11-13,

And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

The Holy Spirit acts within the context of the church and for the sake of the church. We individualistic Americans usually overlook this truth. The Holy Spirit's purpose in breaking into your life is not to make you feel good; the primary purpose is not even to make you well; the purpose is not just to put you into communication with God or in tune with the universe. The goal is not your individual, private, personal well-being. The purpose of the Holy Spirit breaking into your life is to heal you, save you, and empower you so that you may minister. The purpose is to enable you to do the work of God on this earth. You are a part of the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit empowers you to minister to hurting people, to fight injustice, to stand up for the oppressed, to feed the hungry, to love the lost and unlovable, to preach the good news of the gospel, to bring people to Christ and his church, to build up the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit is God in action acting on you so that you can help complete God's action!

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When Paul first came to Ephesus and found a group of Christians, he asked them, (Acts 19:2) "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" Brothers and sisters, I ask you, have you received the Holy Spirit? Has the Spirit broken into your life? Have you received power and courage? Have you been bathed, immersed in love? Ask and you will receive--in God's time.