



# Grace Church

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Rector

## DO YOU BELIEVE IN GOD, THE HOLY SPIRIT

### Sermon for Pentecost Sunday, May 15, 2016

*Readings:* Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104; Romans 14:8-17, 25-27; John 14:8-21

*Sermon text:* "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." John 14:25-27

This is the second of a three part sermon series on the Trinity and the Creeds.

Last week I spoke of my belief in the existence of a Creator—or rather my choice to believe that this universe is not merely self-generated and without purpose. I set out the grounds for my belief that there is a plausible argument to be made that the universe began at a point and is going somewhere—and we are part of the creation beginning to glimpse that plan.

When we talk about this idea of a Creator we are talking about what the church calls God the Father—the source and ground of being, transcendent, mysterious, beyond human comprehension. *God above*. But today I would like to talk about *God within*. The Spirit of God. God moving within the creation as power, life, truth, purpose, peace and joy.

This morning we celebrate the feast of Pentecost, which is above all the church's great feast of the Holy Spirit.

You have heard the story—how the Spirit descended on the disciples gathered in an upper room of a house in Jerusalem in what appeared to be tongues of fire. How they then began speaking in a variety of tongues, that were heard by those outside according to their own native tongue. Was this just babble—like the confusion of languages in the Tower of Babel story (Genesis 10)—or was it a foretaste of the eventual spread of the gospel in every language of the world? This confusion or question—*are you drunk?* someone asked—sparked the church's first sermon. Peter, who had denied Jesus and cowered in fear, now spoke in bold assurance of Christ crucified and raised. Thousands heard and believed and were baptized. The church was born.

You have also heard a passage from the gospel according to John, one of the passages in which Jesus speaks to his disciples about his imminent departure—but also his imminent sending of the Spirit, the *Paraclete*, (Advocate, Comforter, Helper), the Spirit of *Truth* who will remind the disciples of what Jesus had done and said and lead them into truth that they cannot yet understand or bear (John 16:13).

Jesus breathes on them: the peace of God. We remember that the word for spirit comes from breath and wind in Hebrew, Greek and Latin. When we breath we are conspirators of the Holy Spirit.

Consider God as the wind, breath, energy, and power of life. We declare in the Nicene Creed that we believe in the Holy Spirit, **the giver of life**. The Chinese call this life-force or energy *chi*; and many other cultures have a similar idea. (Including many extraterrestrial cultures according to Star Wars: the Force be with you.) Without the Spirit that animates, this universe would be a quite different place; for one thing, who would praise the creator? According to the Psalmist, even the mountains and seas, the earth and all stars, praise the Lord. But somehow life adds another note to the chorus, acknowledging the joy and beauty of creation from within: God within us.

Then we come to conscious life—the mind as it becomes aware of itself and begins to glimpse the idea of a Creator, of a pattern to nature, of truth. And so the Holy Spirit is, as the gospel according to John makes clear, the spirit of truth. Just as the gift of life is given to all living beings, so truth as an attribute of God is not a possession of one religion or culture alone—far from it. All truth of every religion and philosophy and science shares the same spirit (though each realm of truth has its own canon of judgement). In Christian theological understanding, this is because God has created the universe through the Word or Logos (who becomes incarnate in Christ) in collaboration with Wisdom (*Hokmah*, *Sophia*), present at creation (Proverbs 8). If the Logos is the pattern or ratio of objective truth, so Wisdom is the inner grasp of that pattern. And again, other cultures share a similar idea of a pattern or way of the universe which human understanding, properly used, can grasp: for instance, the Chinese term is the Dao (or Tao).

The Holy Spirit is also, as our gospel lesson makes explicit, the spirit of *peace*. Shalom (Hebrew), salaam (Arabic): would that our sister religions find a way to access this spirit. Not easy, of course, for what causes conflicts are competing claims for land or other resources. How do we judge between claims? Where do we get our convictions of morality and justice? Do unto others as you would have them do unto you—so said Jesus—and Confucius and Kant and Hillel and Mohammed. By the age of two, children have a sense of fairness. It is a complicated world and what is right and just not always easy to determine. But imagine a world in which there was no shared sense of justice, no inner sense of individual conscience. It is to imagine a world of psychopaths. And that is to say: people who are missing something critical to being fully human. This is the gift of the spirit of truth and justice and peace.

So far we have discussed the gifts or attributes of the Holy Spirit as shared among all living beings and then among all (or most) humans. But the gift of the Spirit of Christ is the special gift to the church, the spirit of union with Christ, the gift of self-giving love (*agape*). This is the Spirit that descended upon the disciples this day in Jerusalem. It has not gone out of the church—indeed we are witnessing a global revival of Pentecostal fervor. Much of which is distorted by superstition and charlatans; motivated by greed, embraced by the desperate. But, as Peter wrote, “Beloved, test the spirits, for not every spirit is of God” (1 Peter). Not every spirit is truly the spirit of truth or peace or self-giving. But the test is clear: what is the fruit of the spirit in question? Paul writes: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22).

And we do see these fruits of the Spirit, and their opposites, as we look out at the world today. We see the fruits of the Spirit in places where traditional theology and morality did not see them—and so the Spirit leads the church into truth we were not able to understand before. We are being led into new truth on the dignity and equality of women, of all people. We are convicted by the Holy Spirit of the sins of racism and exploitation of earth and other creatures. We are learning from other traditions who have much to teach about bodily practices of mindfulness and spiritual energy; the Spirit has worked in all places, among all peoples; we see that more clearly now. And the Episcopal Church, and many other Christians of the progressive wing of the church, have discerned the fruit of the Spirit in relation to faithful, mutual and lifelong marriage between people of the same sex.

Where the fruits of Spirit are lost or weakened we need the Holy Spirit to remind us of all that Jesus taught and modeled; especially repentance, obedience, forgiveness, courage, and self-giving.

We do not need to “defend” the truth—the truth is powerful. The truth as John wrote, will set you free (John 8:32).

And that is where I think the Spirit is leading the universe, into greater freedom and mindfulness. We are not an accident, or an anomaly, or an absurdity but a harbinger of meaning and melody. It is not all just noise and static—there is a signal, the Holy Spirit, and our spirits are picking it up.

And that is why spiritual disciplines and practices are needed: to tune our spiritual sense, to align our moral compass to the magnetic pole of truth and justice; to hear the distant melody of the stars, and the cry of the suffering and the sojourner.

Each one of us hears this cry—breathes this breath and holy wind in our way, through our own ears and lungs and heart and mind. We translate the babble back into the prophetic word of God, the holy wisdom of God, the teaching and call of Jesus. Breath in the Spirit—I breathe I believe—breath out, love, faith and hope. *Namaste*: the divine in me salutes the divine in you. Believe in God the Holy Spirit, God within.

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