Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

April 21, 2013 Fourth Sunday of Easter

John 15
Creed 11

I Believe in the Holy Spirit

The story goes about the brand new pastor who had been in his first church for just over one month. One day, he heard a knock at the door of the parsonage.

"Is that the Methodist church?" a grinning stranger asked.

He said yes.

"Is this the parsonage?"

"Yes ma'am, it is."

"Well, I need to speak to the minister." And she proceeded to press him to advertise an event in a nearby village.

"It's going to be so exciting. The Holy Spirit is going to be there. I want your people to come at 11 on Sunday."

The pastor said, "But we have worship at 11?"

"Oh, this is different. The Holy Spirit will *really* be over there with us."

Where is the Holy Spirit? And how do we know? And not just WHERE it is, but WHAT it is? The Creed is not so helpful in this area; it doesn't come with explanations. It assumes that those who recite it know what it means.

"I believe in the Holy Spirit." It sounds easy enough. There is the Trinity...a 3-in-1 God that we identify as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...or in the older language, Holy Ghost. But what is the Holy Spirit really, and what does it mean to say we believe in it?

The word in Greek, the original language of the New Testament, is *pneuma*. It is the root of our English word pneumonia and other words that have to do with the lungs and breathing, and in the Bible it has a long, rich history. Back in the Old Testament, the word was *ruach*, and both words meant breath, wind, and spirit...all at once.

For us these words are not connected: Breath, to us, is biology. Wind is meteorology. Spirit is theology. But not so for those who wrote the Bible. For them, the wind that blew by, some of which you breathed in, was all the Spirit of God. God was blowing in the storm; God was giving you every breath; you lived by the Spirit of God.

This idea goes all the way back to the Creation story in Genesis. When God breathes into Adam, the word is *ruach*. It is the breath of God that gives the first man life. In Ezekiel, in that wonderful story about Ezekiel seeing a vision of a valley filled with the dry bones of dead soldiers, it is the wind of God, the *ruach*, that blows over the dry bones and brings them back to life. At Pentecost, as the disciples wait for the gift Jesus promised to them, there is a mighty wind that blows...and sure enough...it is the *pneuma*...the breath, the wind, the Spirit...that fills them and transforms their lives.

So the first thing we mean when we say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit," is all of that rich tradition. In the first two sections of the Creed we have asserted belief in a form of God that we could see

with our eyes...God as a man...Jesus. And now, we are saying that there is still another way that God exists in the world, a different and more universal way.

In Jesus, God is very particular. This man in this place at this time. Belief in Jesus affirms our belief that God will act in history. With the Holy Spirit, we also affirm the ways that God is at work everywhere with everyone at all times. God, the Holy Spirit, gives life to every human being, and according to the Psalms, every living thing on the planet – even "The trees of the field clap their hands." When we take a deep breath, we draw in the life of God.

The Holy Spirit is how God continues to move and work in the world.
The Holy Spirit is God keeping His promise to NEVER LEAVE US!

Knowing this – believing this makes all the difference – especially as we make our way through a week like this past one. I have heard from many who were close to the events on both Monday and Friday, who were genuinely comforted by the God's Holy Spirit with them.

But what about those of us who have never felt the physical presence of the Holy Spirit?

> God is not failing us when we don't feel his presence. God exists, and he exists even more the farther you feel from him. When you feel the anguished desire for God to come near because you don't feel him present, then God is very close to your anguish. God is always our Father and never forsakes us, and that we are closer to him than we think. (Oscar Romero)

Jesus came into the world, not so we might feel different, but that we could be different. The Holy Spirit is NOT a feeling.

The more time I spend thinking about / reading about / discussing with you and others the Christian faith, the more I am convinced that I do not need to have an experience of some sort to believe the truth it holds. My life (or yours or anyone's) should not be the measure of all that is true and meaningful and (especially) of God.

God and His promises in Scripture are the benchmarks and the measure of the Holy Spirit at work in the world. Sometimes He will work in ways that we will **feel**, sometimes in ways that we **know**, sometimes in ways that we **witness**.

But one thing is for sure – when the Holy Spirit is at work – things change – people change. The Holy Spirit at work in our lives, our church, and the world makes us Holy. And holiness is not a matter of gritting your teeth and trying really hard to do what God requires. We may grit our teeth, and we do try hard. But the truth is, we are not able to do what God wants of us, we are not capable of the life God wants for us. A changed life is the **gift** of the Holy Spirit.

Which is why when people join the church, and when the teenagers are confirmed next month, the answers to the questions they give – the vows they make are "I do, with the help of God. I will, with the help of God."

A few weeks ago, in my sermon on "...Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary..." the point was, that "with God, all things are possible." The emphasis being on the "WITH GOD" part!

And, I believe, the Holy Spirit is at His best – in and through the church - where we are conscientiously WITH GOD.

Pastor James Howell tells this story about a church he served:

> This church had a festive potluck dinner at Thanksgiving each year. Everyone in the church came out for it. All eighty members were there - families brandishing their finest casseroles and pies. An after-dinner tradition had developed: one of the women, a guidance counselor at the county school, would identify some family in need, and when the dinner was ended, the ladies would package up a huge box of sumptuous food for delivery to the needy.
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> One year, I drifted back into the kitchen at clean up time to thank everyone, and the Holy Spirit blew into the kitchen uninvited. One of the saints, a bit weary at the end of a long day, declared she was tired, and in an annoyed voice wondered out loud why on earth she had to go and take this food to somebody she didn't even know. Shaking her had in the chagrin of self-pity, she muttered, "Why do we have to deliver this food late like this; I don't understand why in the world we take food to somebody who could have come here themselves two hours ago and have eaten it already."
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> Glances were exchanged, heads were cocked, and a conversation started. Why DO we deliver food when the family could have come and eaten it with us? So somebody tossed out the delicious idea that the next year the guidance counselor would find a family and we'd just invite them to come.
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> And so the next year, as shy as could be, Janice did come, with her two boys, a little tentative at first, but then everyone was so welcoming, the food so tasty. The women still packaged up extra food to send home, and someone asked if they could pick them up on the way to church Sunday morning. Janice asked "What is the dress code?" and the quickest-thinking church member I have ever known answered, "Whatever you have on."
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> So they came. And they came back. Somebody started tutoring the boys and bought them some shoes. Somebody else helped Janice find a job and get her budget in order. She volunteered to help keep the nursery, she love children so much. Then she helped out a desperate elementary teacher with Sunday School one morning and stayed a year.
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> And one day, Janice nervously asked if she and her sons could join our Church, "but I don't really have anything to offer this church," she added.

Yet the Holy Spirit had been at work the whole time!

In the Bible, the Holy Spirit is always coming to groups of people – gathered people. And, in fact, when the Holy Spirit comes in power after Jesus has ascended to heaven – remember he promised to send his Holy Spirit after he returned to the Father – that story is the birthday of the church.

The notion that I might have a private and singular experience of the Holy Spirit apart from the Church came later in the Christian tradition. And different traditions place different emphases on the role of the Holy Spirit in our personal lives and in the life of the church.

I noticed this in particular this week when I was looking for hymns for us to sing this morning. I always try to pick a hymn for us to sing after the sermon that will be connected to it. But as I went through the Holy Spirit section in our hymnal (which is a Baptist hymnal) I noticed that most of them are in the singular - about the Holy Spirit coming to ME. The two hymns that had US singing about the Holy Spirit in OUR lives had hymn tunes that I didn't really like that were unfamiliar to me, so I went with one in the singular. (Next Sunday we'll think more about the church – the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints.)

And we do know the Holy Spirit in personal ways, even as we gather as the church. Like I said with the kids, the Holy Spirit is what gathers us together. The Holy Spirit is the comfort we enjoy when we feel alone or afraid.

But the Holy Spirit is unpredictable. In my sermon on Easter I invited you to take a moment to think about something difficult in your life, a situation causing you distress – maybe a new stress or a burden of a lifetime. Then imagine a resolution, a reconciliation, a healing - how you would **like** things to turn out.

When the Holy Spirit gets involved, the outcome will probably be something OTHER than what you imagine. Because when God acts, it will probably be NOT as we expect.

In our reading from John today, Jesus promises that he will send the Comforter, the Paraclete (Greek for "one who stands beside") who will never leave us. And when we go through weeks like last week, especially we are on the look out for the Holy Spirit in and afterwards. But I fear that we get in the habit of expecting the Holy Spirit to show up only at times of high drama or trauma. And what's amazing about the Holy Spirit is that He is with us ALWAYS - even and especially in the everyday and ordinary times.

So as we relax some… here's a poem that I think captures where we're at…

Let Evening Come
by Jane Kenyon

Let the light of late afternoon
shine through chinks in the barn, moving
up the bales as the sun moves down.

Let the cricket take up chafing
as a woman takes up her needles
and her yarn. Let evening come.

Let dew collect on the hoe abandoned
in long grass. Let the stars appear
and the moon disclose her silver horn.

Let the fox go back to its sandy den.
Let the wind die down. Let the shed
go black inside. Let evening come.

To the bottle in the ditch, to the scoop
in the oats, to air in the lung
let evening come.

Let it come, as it will, and don't
be afraid. God does not leave us
comfortless, so let evening come.

That's what we believe when we say we believe in the Holy Spirit.
Amen.