



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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I Believe in the Holy Ghost

"Third in a Series on the Apostles' Creed"

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“And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” And when they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:15-18).

Almost everyone claims to be spiritual these days, just as most people say they believe in God, but that doesn't tell us much, since people have all sorts of notions about God and spirituality. When the Apostles' Creed says “I believe in the Holy Ghost,” it points to the One who shows us what Christian spirituality really is.

This morning we want to focus on the Person of the Holy Spirit, but first a word about the name. Why does the creed talk about a *Ghost* anyway? Ghosts are spooky and scary, or else they're comic characters like Casper the Friendly Ghost. The name is confusing to some people, so we need to say a word about where it comes from.

We've mentioned before that the traditional language of the creed includes a few archaic words, but we say that version because it's the one many of us learned when we were younger. The word “Ghost” appears because the English term comes from the same root as the German *Geist*, which means spirit or ghost. Sometimes we talk about the *Zeitgeist*, the “spirit of the times,” and the German name for the Holy Spirit is *die Heilige Geist*. You can say “Spirit” in the creed if you like, but that's why the traditional version

talks about the Holy Ghost.

But who is this Holy Spirit? I say “who” because in Christian theology the Spirit is the Third Person of the Trinity. We believe there’s only one God, of course, but within God’s essence there are three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That’s one of the great mysteries of the Christian faith, and the subject for another sermon, but for now the point is that the Holy Spirit is personal, so we don’t talk about the Spirit as “It,” but as “He”—or “She,” as some people prefer. The Greek word for spirit, *pneuma*, is grammatically feminine, and though grammatical gender doesn’t necessarily imply anything at all about the gender of objects, **some Christians are rightly concerned to balance the image** of God the “Father” with a reminder that God is not, after all, either male or female.

The church has always been Trinitarian, believing that God is Three in One, but many Christians are more like “binitarians” in practice. That is, they believe in God the Father, or Creator, and they believe that Jesus is the Son of God, fully human and fully divine—which distinguishes us from Unitarians, Jews, and Muslims, who don’t believe in the divinity of Christ. But many Christians stop with the Father and the Son, and so they miss a vital sense of the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity, actively working in and through their lives.

The Holy Spirit is God present with us, always and everywhere, for guidance, comfort, and strength. John’s gospel says, “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.” When we say that we feel God’s presence, or we feel God leading us or guiding us, we’re really talking about the Holy Spirit.

Our human understanding of God is always limited, and any image we have of God is metaphorical at best, but remembering all three Persons of the Holy Trinity deepens our experience of God and keeps us from falling into traps based on the limits of our language.

A couple decades ago some Christians put together an ad campaign around the country, using a number of billboards with what they thought were clever sayings, inviting people to think more about God and maybe even show up in church. The billboards were simple, all black backgrounds with big white letters, and one of them famously said, “Don’t make me come down there. – God.”

People chuckled over that, but in many ways it conjured up exactly the wrong image. It reinforced the notion of God as “the Man Upstairs,” ordinarily removed from what goes on down here, but if he did show up it would mean you were in some kind of trouble, like when your father had to come downstairs because you were doing something you shouldn’t down in the basement.

Over and against this notion of the Man Upstairs, the Holy Spirit reminds us that God is everywhere at once—almost like gravity, but infinitely more fundamental. God doesn’t have to come down here because God is already here. When the psalmist asks, “Where can I go from your spirit, or where can I flee from your presence?” he knows that God is not just “up there” somewhere, but God is always present: before us, and behind us, and beside us, and even within us.

Jesus says as much when he is about to leave this world, and he tells his disciples:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows you. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

This Spirit, Jesus says, “will teach you everything, and remind you all that I have said to you.” It’s the Holy Spirit who tells us what is true, and convinces us to believe it, and guides us in the way that God would have us live.

In fact, the Holy Spirit gives us the power to do what God would have us do and to become what God would have us be. Some Christians still think of God as a stern Father upstairs, and Jesus as a kind of perfect older brother who sets impossibly high standards we can never live up to—as if the Christian life was mostly about trying harder and harder to be better than we are, only to keep falling down into some muddy puddle of guilt.

But the Holy Spirit cuts through all that struggle, because the Spirit is the one who brings us the power to become a new creation. In classic Christian language, Jesus is the one who justifies, or makes us right with God in principle, and the Spirit is the one who sanctifies, transforming us over time until we become in fact what Christ has already made us in principle. The Holy Spirit takes away the turmoil of trying to be faithful, and fills us instead with God’s comfort and peace and strength. As Paul tells the Philippians, “it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

We don’t have to become Christians all by ourselves. God’s own Spirit, the Holy Spirit, will transform us from the inside out. Christian spirituality, then, is God’s own strength

working in and through us. That's why Paul says the fruit of the Spirit is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Fruit doesn't have to struggle to become what it is. It just grows naturally out of the branch that feeds it. If we let the Holy Spirit take over our lives and give the Spirit room to work within us, we'll naturally become more joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, and generous, more in control of ourselves without obsessively trying to control everyone and everything else around us.

And all of this comes as a gift from God. In fact, among the signs that the Spirit of God is moving within us are the gifts of the Spirit. Paul mentions some of these gifts in his first letter to the Corinthians, and he notes that different people receive different gifts. Some are teachers, and some are particularly wise. Some are healers, and some can even do miracles now and then. Some are especially discerning. They can tell what's going on when others can't see it. And some are prophets. They speak a word from God, just when and where that word needs to be said.

There are other gifts of the Spirit, and Paul's list isn't meant to be exhaustive. God gives all sorts of gifts to people, and whatever those gifts are, they're meant to be spread around for the good of everyone. God's gifts are not to be hoarded, or exploited for our benefit alone. The whole idea of Christian stewardship is that God gives us things so that we can share them with others and build one another up.

The work of the Holy Spirit—all the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit—is to build up the body of Christ, and ultimately to reconcile the world to God in a spirit of unity. So the letter to the Ephesians urges us to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all

humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

That’s exactly the opposite of the spirit of bitterness and anger and division that so many people are sowing in our own country and around the world these days. It’s a sad irony that some of those who spread this spirit of rancor and resentment consider themselves to be good and faithful Christians. But if the fruit of the Holy Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and gentleness, as Paul says, it’s worth asking what sort of spirit produces these uglier fruits that we see all around us.

Lent has traditionally been a penitential season in the life of the church. Not because Christians are a morbid people, but because being faithful to God means having a change of heart and mind, which is what the Greek word *metanoia*, translated “repent,” really means. We have to turn around. We have to stop walking in the ways of the world, stop walking in the direction of bitterness and resentment, and start walking instead in the direction of the kingdom of God.

King David prays in the 51st psalm, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” And the opening theme of the whole gospel declares, “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent, and believe the good news.”

It is the Holy Spirit who creates a clean heart in us, and puts a new and right spirit within us. So when we say “I believe in the Holy Ghost,” we’re saying that God is with us, always and everywhere, and God has the power to make us new; and working in and through us God will transform not

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only our own lives but much of the world around us. That's what Christians mean by spirituality, and it makes for a life worth living—a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called.



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