

Worldly Spirituality

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
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Acts 2:1-21

“Spirituality” is popular in this day and age. Indeed, a growing number of people today speak of themselves as being “spiritual but not religious.” Presumably, they feel a connection to something larger than themselves, but they are not interested in deepening that connection through traditional religious avenues. They tend to be distrustful of religious institutions. They may prefer self-help books over holy scriptures, self-improvement seminars over services of worship.

Simon Critchley, a philosophy professor, and Jamieson Webster, a psychoanalyst, wrote an article in *The New York Times* some years ago entitled “The Gospel According to ‘Me.’” The co-authors wrote of “many citizens in rich Western democracies . . . abandoning their singular, omnipotent (Christian or Judaic or whatever) deity reigning over all humankind and replacing it with a weak but all-pervasive idea of spirituality tied to a personal ethic of authenticity and a liturgy of inwardness.” “In a seemingly meaningless, inauthentic world awash in nonstop media reports of war, violence and inequality, we close our eyes and turn ourselves into islands,” they wrote.

Too often spirituality is understood to be all about one’s own individual self-fulfillment apart from any concern for others or for the world. It is sometimes considered other-worldly. By contrast, Christian spirituality is an engaged spirituality, a worldly spirituality, a down-to-earth spirituality. Christian spirituality is rooted in our experience of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

Now, growing up in the Presbyterian Church, I must admit that I don’t remember hearing much about the Holy Spirit. Of the three

persons of the Triune God, the Holy Spirit seems the most neglected. We spend a lot of time focusing on God as our Divine Parent, as the Creator of the universe in whose image human beings are made. And we give lots of attention to Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, our Redeemer, through whom God reconciles the world to Godself. But, by contrast, the Holy Spirit gets short shrift. And so on this day of Pentecost, when we celebrate the gift of God's Spirit to the disciples and the birth of the Christian Church, I'd like to make a few comments about the Holy Spirit and her work in the world.

The Holy Spirit is the mysterious presence and power of God in our midst. The third person of the Trinity, she stresses the immanence of God. She is God working within us and among us as individuals and communities. The Holy Spirit connects us with God, with one another, and with Creation. Consequently, Christian spirituality is all about connectedness.

This morning, I want to make three points about the Holy Spirit, with a little help from Presbyterian theologian Shirley Guthrie, whose book, *Always Being Reformed: Faith for a Fragmented World*, concludes with a chapter entitled "Worldly Spirituality." My first point is that the Holy Spirit is a creative, life-giving force in the world. Second, the Holy Spirit is a source of inspiration and liberating power. And third, the Holy Spirit empowers the Christian community and its mission in the world.

1) The Holy Spirit is a creative, life-giving force in the world.

The word *spirit* is in Hebrew *ruach*, in Greek *pneuma*, and in Latin *spiritus*. These three words for *spirit* also can be translated as *wind*. So, in the second verse of Genesis, we read that "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while *a wind from God* swept over the face of the waters." Other translations have "*the Spirit of God* was moving over the face of the waters." The Spirit of God is like the wind. You cannot see it, but you can see its effects. You can see the wind rustling the leaves on a tree or making ripples on the surface of a pond. Likewise, you can see the effect of the Holy Spirit in the beauty of a Bach Cantata or in the prophetic power of movements for social

change. Also, like the wind, God's Spirit can be elusive. As Jesus observes: "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes."

The Hebrew, Greek, and Latin words which mean spirit and wind have a third meaning. They can also be translated as "breath." In the book of Job we read: "The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life." Breath is what we have when we're alive. Breathing we also call respiration. Spirit is at its root. Conversely, when we breathe our last breath, we die, we expire. It is God's Spirit, God's breath, that gives us life. God breathes life into us. So, spirit equals breath equals life. We are created and sustained by the mysterious, invisible power of God. The Holy Spirit is God's life-giving agent in Creation.

As Shirley Guthrie puts it: "The Spirit is at work in God's creation and preservation of the world and all life in it. . . . Wherever there is life instead of death in human beings and in their natural environment, and wherever creaturely life is respected, preserved, and defended, there Christians recognize the creative, life-giving Spirit of God at work."

2) The Holy Spirit is also a source of inspiration and liberating power. She inspired the writers of the Bible and inspires us in our reading of the Bible, helping us to interpret and understand the scriptures in our own context. Indeed, "the Spirit of God," Guthrie says, "is the source of all human culture, art, creative skill, intelligence, and wisdom." In Exodus 31, God says of a man named Bezalel, "I have filled him with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft."

It is by God's Spirit that ancient Israel's leaders all received their wisdom, courage, and power. The prophets, too, were filled by God's Spirit (or possessed by it), such that they spoke and acted with an authority and power that was not their own, calling for justice and liberation for the poor and oppressed. The Holy Spirit

energizes resistance to injustice and sets people free. Still, today, the Spirit of God, says Guthrie, is "'in' or 'upon' leaders and prophets who demand political, economic, and social justice for victims of injustice. Wherever such justice is done in the world . . . , there God's Spirit is at work."

The liberating work of the Holy Spirit continues the liberating work of Jesus. Remember the words of Jesus read in the synagogue? "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The Holy Spirit endowed Jesus with power as the Messiah, the Christ. "At every point in Jesus' life," writes Guthrie, "in everything he said and did, he was filled, led, inspired, and empowered by God's Spirit. Jesus was conceived by the Spirit. At his baptism the Spirit descended upon him. By the power of the Spirit he healed the sick, spoke with authority, cast out demonic forces that destroyed people's minds and bodies, and brought good news of liberation to the poor and oppressed. If we want to know what it means to have the Spirit dwell within us, the Gospels say, look at Jesus. He is our prime example of the life of a Spirit-filled person."

3) My third point is that **the Holy Spirit empowers the Christian community and its mission in the world**, which brings us to today's scripture reading. The second chapter of Acts tells of how the disciples were all together in one place in Jerusalem, when suddenly, they heard a sound from heaven, a sound like the rush of a violent wind. It filled the entire house where they were sitting. And then tongues, as of fire, appeared out of nowhere and rested on each one of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they began to speak in foreign languages as the Spirit gave them ability. It was an amazing and awesome scene.

Now you don't have to believe that this account of the Pentecost is a literal description of what actually happened. It may or may

not be. What is important, I think, is to affirm what the writer is trying to communicate with these dramatic images: that something extraordinary happened to the first disciples. Just before his ascension, Jesus said: "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." On the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit gave the early disciples power that they had not known previously. They were now empowered to preach the good news that Jesus is Lord, to risk their very lives if necessary, to proclaim their faith in the risen Christ.

The Holy Spirit empowers the Christian community and its mission in the world. The Holy Spirit represents the presence and activity of God and continuing presence of Jesus Christ in the Church. The Holy Spirit represents Christ to us, since we cannot know Christ directly. She unites us to Christ, spanning the gap between the then and there and the here and now, making Christ real and present to us today.

The sense of community that we feel in this church family is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit in our midst. We are no longer isolated individuals, but are bound together as a community of faith thanks to the Holy Spirit.

Christian spirituality is rooted in our experience of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. It is an engaged spirituality, a worldly spirituality. It is life-giving. It is creative. It inspires. It seeks justice and liberation. It builds community and facilitates communication. It empowers us to continue the work of Jesus Christ in the world. So on this day of Pentecost, let us celebrate the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the lives of others throughout the world. May it be so. Amen.