Sunday March 31, 1974

"GOD'S PRESENCE" John 14:15-17, 25-27 Acts 2:1-4
(No. 5 in a series on the Statement of Faith)

It is reported in the Book of Acts, that when the Apostle Paul came to Ephesus, he found some Christians there and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they replied, "No, we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." (Acts 19:1-2)

Most of us have heard that there is supposed to be something called the Holy Spirit, but we may not have thought much more about it. In our time in particular we have heard a lot more about evil spirits and demons, such as in the book and movie, "The Exorcist." But what about the Holy Spirit?

To help us understand the Holy Spirit, remember what we pointed out last week--the Christian religion is first and foremost and essentially a distinctive message about God. So when we talk about the Holy Spirit, as when we talk about Jesus Christ, we are in reality talking about God, what God is and what God does!

The Statement of Faith which is the foundation for these sermons is primarily a statement about God, what God is and what God does. Thus the Statement of Faith has this to say about the activity and experience of God which we call the Holy Spirit --

"He bestows upon us his Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the Church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues and races."

This morning then, let's try to learn more about the Holy Spirit in order that this part of God's activity and power may be more meaningful to us.

1. Let it be clear from the very beginning that the idea of the Holy Spirit is not just some kind of abstraction which came out of a theologian's thinking. It's not a concept somebody dreamed up. The Holy Spirit was first a fact of experience and then there was the attempt to describe the experience.

The early Christians after the resurrection knew that they had received new energies, new power that they had not had

before. They knew that God was present and working in them in a new way. Again, first came the experience and then the attempt to name it.

This is true of all church doctrines and theology itself. Take the doctrine of the "Trinity." The early Christians knew that they had experienced God in at least three ways. They were aware of God as Creator and judge, the God of the cosmos, but they were also aware that they had experienced God in a unique personal way in Jesus Christ, and then following the resurrection of Jesus, they were aware of God's power in a new way. They knew that God was present with them in power; that he was their unseen companion, and constant aid; that he brought them together in a new kind of community that was made up of all kinds of people--they called this the Holy Spirit.

2. Another way of describing the Holy Spirit is to say that it is the activity of God, the Divine Power coming into our midst in the here and now. The Holy Spirit is a way of describing something which God does. It is a description of God at work in our world in a particular way. Someone might ask, "What on earth is the Holy Spirit?" and this is an unintentionally well-phrased question. The Holy Spirit is God engaged on earth and throughout creation, doing his work and his will.

3. We also need to make it clear that this Spirit of God is real and personal. We often talk about things like "school pirit," or the "spirit of a certain group," "the spirit of Christmas , and many other kinds of spirits. In talking this way, we are talking about something more or less definite. But when Christians talk about the Holy Spirit, we mean the power of God acting in and on ordinary human personalities. It is this living Spirit of God which produces in people extraordinary Christian living.

Of course we can go on believing vaguely in God, the God above who is aloof from all the strains and problems of modern living. And we can go on believing that Jesus Christ lived a nice life a long time ago and left us some wonderful teachings. But if we want our Christian faith to become real to us, to make a difference in the quality of our living, then we have to deal with the Living Spirit of God here and now, in other words, with the Holy Spirit!

Thus every time we say that we believe in the Holy Spirit, we are saying that we believe there is a living God, able and willing to enter our world and our personal lives for the good.

Now the Statement of Faith says--God bestows upon us His Holy Spirit. In other words, it is a gift from God. There's nothing we can do to conjure up the spirit like a magician.

While Jesus was yet on earth in the flesh, he promised his disciples and followers the gift of the Holy Spirit. He said in effect, "I will leave you as a person who is physically present, but after I leave, the Spirit will come with power and will teach you all things. God's Spirit will guide you, give you the power to carry on the work I have been doing. In other words, Jesus was saying, I will be with you to the close of the age--God will be present with you in a new way.

This morning as part of our scripture lesson we read some of the story of the first Pentecost, which is an account of the early disciples having an experience of God's Spirit. They were gathered together in one place and were infused with the Spirit of God as they had not known it before. Even the New Testament has trouble describing the event. It was as if the disciples had been set on fire--they found a new power, a new courage, and from that point on the power was evident in them as they traveled about the world.

It is the faith of the Christian church that God still bestows his Holy Spirit on us. It is available to anyone. The Biblical image of the Spirit is essentially dynamic. Spirit is active, formative, lifegiving power. It is that which works for peace, unity and harmony in the world and in the lives of persons.

And having the Holy Spirit is not just a private personal matter. Quite the contrary, when the Bible speaks of God's spirit as being most active, it is always within the context of a community or group of persons. Jesus said--"where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I also." Pentecost was experienced by a group of persons. Furthermore the Holy Spirit or God's Spirit brings community into being.

Our Statement of Faith puts it this way: "God bestows upon us His Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the Church of Jesus Christ."

God, through his spirit continually works at creating community. To put it another way, the Christian Church is a community of the Spirit, and it is essentially God's community because he has brought it into being and continually renews it; gives it life.

So often we like to think of the church as our church, or as something we have created or started. Yet in the deepest sense it is not ours at all. Most of the fights and squabbles within church congregations come out of the fact that we the members come to think of the church as exclusively ours; that we can determine what is going to happen without any referene to what God intends for his church.

It is precisely here that the church is different from any other organization on this earth. It is not ours. We did not bring it into being all by ourselves. The Church is God's community and in it we seek to follow his Spirit's guidance.

It is for this reason that the church is the oldest continuing institution on earth. It has been called the "anvil that has worn out many hammers." It has survived the baleful predictions of cynics; it has survived the attacks of its enemies, it has survived even the support of its own members and friends. There is something indestructible about the church precisely because it has been and continues to be created and renewed by God's Holy Spirit.

In the New Testament the church is called the "Body of Christ." And just as Christ could not be made to stay dead after his crucifixion, so the church cannot be finally killed or destroyed by anyone.

This is especially good news for us. Often we get depressed about the church and its existence in the world and we seem to think that the church depends solely on us. In all churches, people have gotten angry from time to time and said --"I'll quit and then we'll see what happens!" And of course the church has continued.

This is not to say that the church cannot use our support and our money and our time. It certainly can! But it is

to say that the church will also survive without us and that ultimately the church belongs to God and it is his instrument for carrying on his witness in the world.

And God continually purifies and renews the church. Many times throughout history when the church has seemed dead, sterile and irrelevant, God through his Holy Spirit working in and through persons has brought new life into the church. Many times various kinds of groups of persons and even nations have tried to capture the church and make it into something it is not intended to be--and God through his Spirit has renewed the church and reformed it.

God renewed the church in its very early history when some of the Apostles thought the message of the Christian faith should be proclaimed to Jews only; some wanted to make the church exclusive. No, God's Spirit said--In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male or female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ.

In the Reformation of the 16th century and in many other smaller reformations throughout church history, God's Spirit has moved to renew the church. God's renewal of the church goes on continually and many times we may be unaware of it for awhile, then all of a sudden the Spirit breaks out of its mold with new power. God's Spirit cannot be limited or hemmed in by us.

The Statement of Faith then gives some specific examples of what God's Spirit does through and in the church. "He binds together people of all ages, tongues and races."

This is important because religion as well as binding people together in harmony and community so that all of our lives are enriched, also has the ability at times to distract, divert and divide people. Any kind of religious revival is not automatically a good thing. Or just because one kind of religious movement is being successful in worldly terms while another seems to be waning does not necesaarily have anything to do with the validity of either one. The churches that cooperated and blessed what Hitler was doing in Germany in the 1930's were prospering, while the "anti-Nazi" churches were small, suspect and persecuted.

There was time in this country that the churches which continued to bless segregation of the races and the status

quo, often prospered, while the churches which sought to bind together in covenant people of all ages, tongues and races, those which challenged prejudice and segregation suffered.

Yet it is the witness of the Bible and our Christian Faith that God continually works through his church and in other ways to bring all persons into a community of harmony and peace. God is taking all people and binding them in covenant to Him and with one another.

There is something about God's Holy Spirit that abhors false distinctions, segregation--thus a class church or a church available to only one race or group, or a national church, constitutes a sin against the Holy Spirit which seeks to bind in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues and races.

Thus look at how a church or religious institution or movement or sect treats the outcasts of society, those in trouble, those in need, the losers, the lonely, the persecuted and you will be able to tell if the Holy Spirit is or is not working in that group. The Bible puts it plainly, "If any one says I love God and hates his brother, he is a liar."

It is the witness of the Bible and our Christian faith that God's Holy Spirit calls us to wholeness and to seeing the world and creation whole. God's Spirit is that Spirit which draws us out of ourselves into openness, love and acceptance. As Paul said, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

Those Spirits which lead us into narrowness, exclusiveness, dogmatism, are not of God. It is my hope that in First-Plymouth Church God's Holy Spirit will continue to create and renew us and will bind together in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues and races. I also hope that we will be a community of vision where joy and intimacy and awe, mystery and prayer can be found but that these will not distract us from the pain of the world, but empower us to share it and overcome it. Amen.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What puzzles you most about the doctrine of the Holy Spirit?

2. What are some of the ways in which you see God's Spirit at work in the world today?

3. The Church is sometimes called "God's Community on earth." Discuss how it differs from other institutions.

4. Re-read the story of Pentecost, Acts 2:1-13, and discuss the symbolism of people being gathered together from all nations. "Binding in covenant people of all ages, tongues and races."