Sunday May 21, 1978

Book 7

"HAVE YOU HEARD THERE IS A HOLY SPIRIT?" Acts 2:1-4, 19:1-2

According to the Book of Acts in the New Testament, when the Apostle Paul came to the City of Ephesus, he found some Christians there and he asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you were baptized?" And they replied, "No, we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

I suspect that some of us are like those Christians in Ephesus, we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit, or if we have heard it, we are confused about it. The idea of the Holy Spirit is partly confusing because "Spirit" is always difficult to describe or understand and this is true whether we are talking about the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christmas, school spirit, evil spirit, or any other kind of spirit.

Earlier in the Book of Acts, when the early church tried to describe its unique experience of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, about all it could say was that it was like fire; that is, it set them on fire; it gave them new energy and drive to carry on God's work. It was like the rush of a mighty wind which also suggests power and force in their lives. It was an attempt to describe an ex-perience that was indescribable with words alone.

Because the Holy Spirit is difficult to describe and be-cause it's something we human beings cannot control, there has usually been some controversy about the Holy Spirit. In New Testament times, some Christians accused other Christians of not having the Holy Spirit or not paying enough attention to it. Some parts of the church even tried to set up certain tests to determine whether or not one really had the Spirit, and there were disputes within congregations because one faction claimed to have more evidence of possessing the Holy Spirit than other factions.

Such controversy about the Holy Spirit has often occurred throughout the history of the church. For example, in about 150 A.D. a group appeared called the Montanists, named for their founder Montanus, who believed the church was being deprived of the gifts of the Holy S;irit because of its moral laxity. The group was known for its speaking and making strange sounds and for its prophecy calling for repentance because they believed the end of the world was at hand.

In the early middle ages, the roles of the Holy Spirit, prophecy and apocalypticism again became a major concern in parts of the church. One particular group of Christians believed that the age of the Holy Spirit would begin in the middle of the 13th century and that the church then fallen and in bad shape, would be restored and the permanent age of love would begin.

In the past two centuries, America has experienced several religious upheavals sometimes called "Great Awakenings" by church historians. The first, in the middle 18th century was lead by one of America's first great theologians, Jonathan Edwards, a Congregational minister in New England, and aided by John Wesley and George Whitefield, both from England. A century later this country experienced "the second Great Awakening," led by a large number of evangelists, outstanding among whom was Charles G. Finney.

If we count the settlement of New England itself as a religious movement in the 17th century, America has had three religious upheavals at approximately one-century intervals. Each of these followed a period of indifference to religion. It is significant that while the country was going through these religious upheavals few people realized that we were in the midst ofa revival.

Some observors of the religious scene claim that we are again in some kind of period of religious awakening. Maybe we are and maybe we are not. It's probably much too early to tell. We hear a lot today about the "Charismatic" movement. The word "charismatic" comes from the Greek word, Charisma, meaning divine gift. People who claim to be charismatic claim that their ecstasy, their unique feeling comes from knowing they are possessed by God's Holy Spirit.

I mention this brief history this morning to illustrate that the experience of the Holy Spirit or the charismatic movement in our own time is nothing new--it is part of the total history of the church from the very beginning. And in each period of church history, a similar problem has come up. Some of those who claim to have a special possession of the Holy Spirit become exclusive and want others to believe that if they have not had the same experience, they are not a part of the true church. St. Paul faced this problem with the church in Corinth, and the problem is with us again today.

How does one tell if he or she or a group or movement has some of the gifts of the Spirit? How do we keep from becoming exclusive rather than inclusive? How can we evaluate the quality of our own religious experience and the experience of others? How can we tell if a person or group has heard there is a Holy Spirit? The New Testament itself gives us the answers.

1. To begin with, St. Paul reminded the church in Corinth and he reminds us that there are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit. There are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inpsires them all in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (I Corinthians 12:4-8)

Paul is saying that there is no one exclusive experience which is evidence of God's Spirit at work in a person or group such as the ability to speak in tongues; rather God's Spirit works in people and in the world at large in a wide variety of ways, and that it always works for the common good. In other words, one person's or group's experence of God's Spirit working within them may be quite different from another. There are varieties of gifts. The test is, does it work for the common good or is it divisive and destructive? Does it lead to wholeness, health and integrity?

Jesus Christ said the same thing in another way--"You will know them by their fruits." Jesus said in effect, "Don't pay too much attention to what people say about their having the spirit--look at what they do, how they act, how they treat people. And he went on in one of his parables to describe how ~~one~~ we can separate true religion from false religion or empty religion. "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me."

In fact, Jesus said, those who truly have God's Holy Spirit within them are often surprised by the fact and ask in wonder, "Lord when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" And God answers, "Truly I say to you as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me." In other words--

THE WAY YOU TREAT PEOPLE IS THE WAY YOU TREAT GOD! It's one of the most basic tests for evaluating the integrity and truth of any religious group or movement or your own personal religion. See how a religious movement or church or sect or your own personal faith causes you to treat the outcasts of society, those in trouble, those in need, the losers, the down-and-outers, the cripples, the retarded, the persecuted and the poor? God's Spirit is present when such people are being treated with respect and dignity.

2. And there are other evidences of God's Spirit at work in the world and in groups and individuals. A person or church that is filled with the Holy Spirit and working in cooperation with that Spirit is open to new possibilities and is not a "know-it-all" group or person. The Holy Spirit brings humility. St. Paul goes on to say in the New Testament that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." The fruit of the Spirit is much more than ecstasy!

Does an individual or a group claim to possess the Holy Spirit? How does the individual or group square with the admonition of Jesus when he said, "If any person would come after me, let him deny himself and follow me. For whoever would save his or her life will lose it and whoever loses his or her life for my sake and the Gospel's will find it."

Or ask this question of yourself or of a group which claims to have the Holy Spirit-- "Am I encouraged to make use of all the religious knowledge and skills available? Am I encouraged to use both emotion and reason? It is the witness of the Bible that God's Spirit calls to wholeness, and to seeing the world and creation whole. God's Spirit is that Spirit which draws us out of ourselves. It is furthermore the witness of the Bible that those movements, religious or otherwise, those leaders, those spirits which would lead us into narrowness, exclusiveness, dogmatism are not the Spirit of God at work in the world.

When St. Paul was dealing with the conflict in the congregation in Corinth concerning the gift of the Holy Spirit, he pointed out to the Christians there that when a person truly is living a life filled with the Holy Spirit, then that person's life issues forth a particular kind of love-- Here's how he described it:

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."

Then Paul described the kind of love which God's Holy Spirit causes us to practice and exhibit. "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

"Love never ends; as for prophecy, it will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; but when I became a man I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

And then Paul added this statement to the church in Corinth--"Make love your aim."

Have you heard there is a Holy Spirit? You've heard there is and that Spirit is working in you if your life is filled with the kind of love which Paul here describes.

Amen.