Sunday, May 19, 1991
WHAT IS THE HOLY SPIRIT? (2ND SERMON IN A SERIES: SERMONS YOU'VE REQUESTED)
Acts 2:1-4, 19:1-2

On the sermon request forms that were turned into my office, several of you requested a sermon on the subject of the Holy Spirit. One person said to me, "When I was growing up, and we said the Apostle's Creed in church every Sunday, that creed said something about the Holy Ghost, and that was frightening to me. What is the Holy Spirit, or Holy Ghost as it is sometimes called?" There's a lot of misunderstanding about the Holy Ghost.

There was a little girl, ten years old, of another religion who had never been to a Christian worship service. One Sunday, she went to church with the family she was visiting. When they returned home, they asked her what she thought of the worship service. She said, "There's one thing that really puzzled me. I don't understand why the West Coast wasn't included too." "What are you talking about?" they asked. She answered, "The minister kept saying, 'In the name of the Father, the Son, and the whole East Coast.'"

What is the Holy Spirit? 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 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 there is a Holy Spirit, or if we have heard it, we are confused about it. "Spirit" is always difficult to describe, define, 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 explain its 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 something that was indescribable with words alone.

Because the Holy Spirit is difficult to define and because it's something we human beings cannot control, there has usually been some controversy about the Holy Spirit within the church. In New Testament times, some Christians accused other Christians of not having the Holy Spirit or not paying enough attention to the Spirit. 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 Spirit than others.

There were at one time some small church groups in this country that practiced "snake handling" as one test of whether or not an individual possessed the Holy Spirit. If you could handle poisonous snakes and not be bitten, or if you were bitten and did not die, then this was supposedly proof that you had the Holy Spirit.

What is the Holy Spirit? An ancient church creed that I once memorized states: "We believe in the Holy Spirit, God present with us for guidance, for comfort, and for strength." That's a very good definition and summary.

What is the Holy Spirit? Another way of putting it is to say that it is the Spirit of God working within us and among us.

In the Old Testament, we first encounter the Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit in creation. The creation stories in the Book of Genesis tell us: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.” The Hebrew word for Spirit is “ruach,” which means wind or breath — in this case, a life-giving element. Thus, later in the creation stories, we are told:

“Then the Lord God formed human beings from the dust of the earth and breathed into our nostrils the breath of life.” (Genesis 2:7) Here, the Spirit of God is defined as the “breath of life.” Therefore, it is implied that God’s Spirit, or the Holy Spirit, is within us and among us in creation from the very beginning.

In other words, the term “Holy Spirit” is not something separate or different from God, but a way of talking about the activity of God at work from the beginning of creation and still at work within and among us. Someone put it this way: God the Holy Spirit is God in action — God at work in the universe, in the church, and in each one of us.

Knowing the reality of the Holy Spirit is like knowing the reality of the sun in the sky. We don’t, if we are wise, stare up at the sun. We know its reality by the life and light of the world around us. We can see what it does. A sun worshipper, ancient or modern, never said, “Look how beautiful the sun is.” We look at the radiant flowers, the soaring mountains, the rolling ocean, and the shining rivers, and say, “What a beautiful world.” Just as the sun gives life to the world, so God’s Spirit gives life to each one of us. The Nicene Creed says, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life.”

The Bible throughout invites us to see the whole cosmos as throbbing with the life of the Spirit of God. We have learned much about the nature and structure of creation since Bible days, and we know that we are part of an infinitely larger cosmos.

This life-giving spirit, which we in the Christian faith call the Holy Spirit, is both corporate and personal. There are times when we feel the Spirit moving among us in a most powerful way when we are gathered together, as was the group of believers on that first Pentecost.

We can also experience the power of the Holy Spirit in our personal lives. For example, it is the same life-giving Spirit of God that is at work in the human mind and heart, inspiring the work of the scientist, the vision of the artist, the insight of the poet, and the recovery of what we know as “reverence for life.” To be in touch with the life-giving Spirit is to come alive at the center of our being — to rejoice in the discoveries of biology, zoology, and astrophysics, and also to respond to the deep mystery of creation.

All of us have the life-giving Spirit of God, that which we call the Holy Spirit, within us, for as the Bible says, God has breathed into us the breath of life. However, we can let the Spirit lie dormant and pay little attention to it, or we can let ourselves be led by the Spirit.

But there is another side to all of this. Some people who claim to be inspired by the Spirit are led astray and can also lead us astray. We are in a world where there is obviously another force at work in direct opposition to the life-giving Spirit. Religious history is filled with false

prophets, self-proclaimed gurus, and cult leaders who have led people into death rather than life.

Jesus warned his followers to “beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” The writer of the letter of First John in the New Testament warns his readers, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

How then do we test the spirits to see whether they are of God? Some of the usual tests we use in the secular world do not fit. For example, merely because a religious group or cult is fast-growing and successful in statistical terms does not mean it is necessarily being led by God’s Holy Spirit. The churches that cooperated and blessed what Hitler was doing in the 1930s were prospering, while the anti-Nazi church was small, suspect, and persecuted. Frequently, the individual or the group that cries out, “The Emperor has no clothes,” is not listened to but is shouted down.

What then are some ways to test the spirits among us and within us?

First of all, if someone or a group claims to have all the truth and the only truth — BEWARE! Jesus said the Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit is like the wind — it blows where it will and cannot be controlled or monopolized by any one person, religion, or group.
Rather, a person or church that is filled with God’s Spirit and being led by the Holy Spirit is open to new possibilities, new truth, new discoveries, and is not afraid of the latest Biblical discoveries and scholarship. As Pastor John Robinson told our Pilgrim mothers and fathers, “The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from the Word.”

Jesus said, “You will know them by their fruits.” And St. Paul later followed by saying, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” (Galatians 5:22)

Secondly, it is the witness of the Bible that God’s Spirit is always calling us to wholeness, and to seeing the world and creation as whole, as connected, interdependent. God’s Spirit is that which draws us out of ourselves and helps us see our connections with other people who are not the same as us and with all of creation.
It is significant that on the first Pentecost, when God’s Holy Spirit was experienced by the followers of Jesus and others who were with them, they all sensed a oneness, a unity, among them that they had not known in the same way before. The usual barriers that divide people were no longer at work, at least for a time. For example, they could understand each other even though they spoke different languages.

On the other hand, those movements, religious or otherwise, those leaders who would lead us into narrowness, exclusiveness, and dogmatism are not being led by God’s Spirit.

What is the Holy Spirit? It is God working in you and me and among us as a gathering of people who follow Jesus. To be in touch with the life-giving Spirit means a religion of joyful, adventurous living, knowing that God is with us always. When we let God’s Spirit work in us, we are delivered from both the arrogance of those who think they’ve made it and the despair of those who never can. Amen.