Sunday, June 7, 1992
WHERE AND WHAT IS GOD'S SPIRIT?
Acts 2:1-4; Matthew 7:15-20

A few weeks back, someone gave me a new little book that contained the latest collection of children's letters to God. Reading these letters helps one realize that many of the children's comments and questions are really adults' comments and questions expressed in simpler language. For example, one child wrote: "Dear God, I had three stitches and a shot. I wish you would not make it so easy for people to come apart." A little boy asked: "Dear God, is it true that my dad won't get into heaven if he uses his bowling words in the house?" A young girl named Jane asked, "Dear God, do you ever go on vacation?" Here's a deep philosophical question: "Dear God, how did you know you were God?" Or how about this one? "Dear God, instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't you just keep the ones you got now?"

Here are two more letters: "Dear God, my brother told me about being born, but it doesn't sound right." "Dear God, is Reverend Coe a friend of yours, or do you just know him through business?"

In this season of Pentecost, when the church remembers and celebrates the power of God's Spirit in and among us, these children's comments and questions in their letters to God made me think of the many questions people have about the Holy Spirit. Here are a few: Where and what is the Holy Spirit? Is the Holy Spirit something different from God? How can I tell if it's the Holy Spirit guiding me or something else? A child might put it this way: "How can I tell if it's a good spirit guiding me or a bad spirit?"

Let's begin with the Bible's understanding and description of the Holy Spirit. In both the Old and New Testaments, the term "Holy Spirit" is another way of speaking of God's Spirit or God's activity, and it is never something separate or distinct from God. In the creation stories in the book of Genesis, for example, it is the Spirit of God that brings order out of chaos. We are also told that God breathed into human beings the "breath of life," and the Hebrew word for spirit is "ruach." In the New Testament, the Greek word for spirit and breath is "pneuma." At one point in his ministry, we are told that "Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"

Later, after the resurrection of Jesus, there's also the story in the book of Acts about the followers of Jesus being gathered together in one place and their experience of the power of God's Spirit in their midst. Here again, the Spirit is compared to the power of a mighty wind, as if it were God's breath blowing among them.

In other words, to talk about the Holy Spirit is another way of describing God's activity, God's love and power in all of creation, and in and among us human beings as well.

But how can we distinguish the Spirit of God from false spirits or evil spirits that would lead us astray? Religious history is filled with individuals and groups claiming to be speaking for God's Spirit, but later events have proved them to be false.

For example, in the early days of 1524, the people of London were told that the city was doomed. Crowds of anxious people from every social group gathered to listen to numerous astrologers and fortune tellers, all saying the same thing. On February 1, the Thames River

would rise from its banks, engulf the entire city, and sweep away 10,000 homes. The vision was described in terrifying detail to increasingly larger groups.

It had started the preceding June when a few soothsayers began to make that prediction, and the rumors spread. Month after month, the warnings were repeated with total assurance, and as time passed, they became accepted by most of the population, even though the Thames had always been the most docile of rivers.

At first, only a handful of families began to leave the city, but as the time grew near, people left in ever-increasing numbers. Long streams of poor families and individuals tramped the muddy roads to higher ground, 15 to 20 miles away. They were joined by more prosperous neighbors whose horse-drawn carts were piled high with their possessions. Nobles and clergy followed suit, and by the middle of January, over 20,000 people had left the city. London was rapidly becoming a ghost town.

Electing to stay, the prior of St. Bartholomew's built a tower-like structure on Harrow-on-the-Hill and provisioned it for two months. He also acquired several boats manned by expert rowers — just in case.

When the ill-fated day arrived, some braver souls stayed behind to watch. The soothsayers had predicted that the river would rise slowly, allowing those who could run fast enough to escape. The hour finally came, and to the consternation of the watchers, nothing happened. The tide quietly ebbed and flowed, ebbed and flowed, as it always had. The onlookers realized that they had been duped. Still, to be safe, most stayed up that night and continued to watch the river.

The next morning, with the Thames continuing to flow peacefully within its banks, the crowd, joined by the returning evacuees, was boiling with fury. Many shouted to throw the soothsayers into the river. Fortunately, the prophets were prepared. In a clever maneuver, seemingly not lost on present-day fortune tellers, they said they had scrupulously re-checked their calculations the previous night and found a minute error. London was most certainly doomed, the stars and other signs were undeniably right. But because of a minor oversight, the great flood would occur in 1624, not 1524. The good townspeople could go home.

As I said, religious history is filled with individuals and groups who claim to have a special revelation from God's Spirit and who have gone on to predict exact dates for the end of the world, only to have the date pass and nothing happen. Then, like the soothsayers in London in the 1500s, they say they miscalculated and pick another date.

For some reason or another, dates on the calendar like the year 1000, and now soon to come 2000, seem to attract the most dire predictions of things to come. Thus you can be sure that the closer we come to the year 2000, the more predictions you will hear, both good and bad, and many of these predictions will be from individuals claiming to speak for God's Spirit.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Beware of false prophets; you will know them by their fruits." The New Testament also advises us in another place to "test the spirits to see whether they are of God." A little later, I'll be talking about some tests we can all use. But first, what is it in us as individuals and as groups that makes us so vulnerable to being deceived?

When we're part of a group, our desire for security, for being accepted and affirmed, can also lead to our unwillingness to stand alone, even when we are fearful that the group is headed in

the wrong direction. Loyalty to the group can also make it difficult for an individual to raise an objection or point out a weak argument.

Religious groups can be deceiving and misleading as much as any other group, if not more so.

Thus, someone is frequently needed, like the little child in Hans Christian Andersen's story, "The Emperor's New Clothes," who said, "But he's got nothing on."

On the other hand, it is also the testimony of the Bible that God's Spirit is most often experienced in a group. In other aspects of life as well, we talk about the "spirit" of the group — for example, school spirit. The "spirit" in a group can be empowering, life-sustaining, and inspiring. Above all, the church, according to the Bible, is to be a community of the Spirit as we seek to follow the leadings of the Divine Spirit, the Spirit of God, or that which we call the Holy Spirit.

And this is where the problem comes in — often there are conflicting voices, each claiming to be speaking for God's Spirit. How can we tell which is God's Spirit and which is not?

Some of the usual tests we might use for other activities are not sufficient. For example, merely because a group is fast-growing or successful in the short run does not mean that it has the truth. Large groups of people have been deceived for long periods of time and only later discover they have been had. This is true of many cults, and it has also been true of parts of the church at one time or another.

For example, in the 1930s, those churches in Germany that supported what Hitler was doing were prospering, while the "anti-Nazi" church was small, suspect, and persecuted. Often, the one or the group that cries out, "The Emperor has no clothes," is not listened to for the time being, but is shouted down.

The churches in this country that continued to bless segregation and the status quo in the South, and other parts of the country as well, often prospered following the Civil War, while the churches that challenged prejudice and segregation suffered.

What then are some ways to test the spirits among us? Or to put it another way, how can we tell good religion from bad religion, the Holy Spirit from evil spirits?

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. He also said in another place, "I have many sheep, some who are not of this fold."
A person or group or church that is filled and is being led by God's Holy Spirit is open to new possibilities, new truth, new discoveries, and is not afraid of the latest Biblical discoveries, nor is it threatened by new scientific theories. As Pastor John Robinson told our Pilgrim mothers and fathers, "The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from the word."

Secondly, it is the witness of the Bible that God's Holy Spirit is always calling us to wholeness and to seeing the world and creation as interdependent. God's Spirit is that which draws us out of ourselves and helps us to see our connections with other people who are not like us and with all of creation.
It is significant that on the first Pentecost, when God's Holy Spirit was powerfully experienced by the followers of Jesus and others with them, they all sensed a oneness, a unity among them

that was new. The book of Acts reports that although there were people present from many different countries and ethnic groups, and they spoke many different languages, they could understand each other as if they were all speaking one language. All barriers that had previously divided them disappeared. In other words, what united them was more important than what divided them.

It is also the witness of the Bible that those movements, religious or otherwise, those leaders, those spirits which would lead us into narrowness, exclusiveness, and dogmatism, are not of God's Spirit. And in the long run, those movements will fail. However, in the meantime, they can and do cause much conflict, pain, and suffering.

Thirdly, Jesus in his parable of the sheep and the goats described another test for determining those who are being led by God's Spirit and those who are not. "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."
Then said Jesus, "The righteous will ask, '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?' Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me." In other words, the way you treat people is the way you treat God. It's one of the most basic tests of the Spirit. See how a religious group or church, or cult or sect or whatever kind of group, treats the outcasts of any society — those in trouble, those in need, those who are different from us, those we consider the losers, the sinners, the down and out, the retarded, the persecuted. Do we exclude those different from us? Do we try to avoid them? Or do we see them also as children of God and loved by God?

The Spirit of God, or that which we call the Holy Spirit, is always present within us and among us and is ready to empower us as individuals and as groups of Christians. When we cooperate and are open to that loving Spirit, we receive power to live this life joyfully and creatively. Amen.