Sunday, May 18, 1997
TESTING THE SPIRITS
Acts 2:1-4, 19:1-2; I John 4:1

Not long ago, someone said to me, “When I was growing up and we said the Apostle’s Creed in church every Sunday, that creed had something to say about the Holy Ghost, and that was puzzling to me. What is 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 was 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 priest kept saying, ‘In the name of the Father, the Son, and the whole East Coast.’”

Even the members of the New Testament church were not clear in their understanding of the Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit. According to the book of Acts, 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.”

Perhaps some of you are like those Christians in Ephesus. You may not have heard that there is a Holy Spirit, or more likely, you 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 spirits, or any other kind.

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 gave them energy, motivation, and power to carry on God’s work. It was an attempt to describe something that is indescribable with words alone.

The simplest way to describe it is to say that after the resurrection of Jesus, and when the early followers could no longer see or touch him, his presence and love were still with them, and they called it the “Holy Spirit.”

But God’s Spirit was not something new and available only to followers of Jesus. 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 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.” The Hebrew word for wind, breath, and spirit is the same word. In the New Testament, the Greek word for spirit and breath is also the same. At one point in his ministry, we are told that “Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

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, for example, 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 tests to determine whether or not a congregation or individual truly had the Spirit. There were also disputes within congregations because one faction claimed to have more evidence of possessing the Holy Spirit than others.

In our own country, not very many years ago, there were some small church groups that practiced “snake handling” as one test of whether or not an individual possessed the Holy Spirit. The test was this: if you could handle a poisonous snake and not be bitten, or if you were bitten and did not die, this was proof that you had the Holy Spirit.

It’s an understatement to say that this kind of test has no validity for determining the presence of God’s Spirit. But how can we distinguish the Spirit of God from false 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 false.

For example, in the early days of 1524, the people of London were told that the city was doomed. Crowds of anxious people of every social class gathered to listen to numerous astrologers and fortune-tellers, all of whom claimed to have God’s Spirit speaking through them. God’s Spirit had revealed to them that 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 individuals 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, fleeing to safe country estates. By the middle of January, over 20,000 people had left the city. London was rapidly becoming a ghost town.

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 as it always had. An awareness slowly spread over the good people that they had been fooled. 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 wanted to throw the soothsayers into the river. Fortunately, the prophets were prepared. In a clever maneuver, seemingly not lost on present-day predictors of future events, they said they had scrupulously re-checked their calculations the previous night and found a small error. London was most certainly doomed, the 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 and be safe for at least 100 more years.

Religious history is filled with individuals and groups who claim to have special knowledge of 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, and then, like the predictors of the future in London in the 1500s, they say they miscalculated.

As we near the year 2000, you can be sure that there will be many people who claim to speak for God and who are certain that the world as we know it will come to an end or undergo some other cataclysmic transformation.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Beware of false prophets. You will know them by their fruits." The Bible tells us in another place to "test the spirits to see whether they are of God." A little later, I'll be talking about some ways to do this. 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 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 make it difficult for an individual to raise an embarrassing question.

Religious groups can be deceiving and misleading as much as any other group, if not more so. Thus, someone is frequently needed, like the 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 often experienced when faithful people are gathered together. In other aspects of life as well, we talk about the "spirit" of the group. 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 God's will.

And this is where the problem comes in — frequently there are conflicting voices, each claiming to be following God's Spirit. How can we tell which is of God 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 it has the truth. Large groups of people have been deceived for long periods of time and only later discover they have been misled. This is true of many cults, and it has also been true of parts of the church at one time or another.

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

First, 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. This means that a person or group being led by God's Spirit is open to new possibilities, new truth, and new discoveries, and is not afraid of the latest Biblical research, 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."

Second, it is the witness of the Bible that God's Spirit is always calling us to wholeness and to seeing the world and the 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 different from us and to recognize our connection with all of creation. It is significant that on the first Pentecost, when God's Spirit was powerfully experienced by the followers of Jesus and others with them, they all sensed a oneness, a unity. 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 which had previously divided them were overcome. What united them was more important than what divided them.

A third test for determining where God's Spirit is at work is described by Jesus in his parable of the sheep and the goats: "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 in prison, and you visited me." Then said Jesus, "The righteous will ask—'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 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?' Then Jesus said, 'As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me.'"

The way you treat people is the way you treat God. It's one of the most basic tests of the Spirit at work. See how a religious group, church, cult, or sect treats the outcasts of society — those in trouble, those in need, those who are different from us, those we consider as the losers, the sinners, the down-and-out. Do we exclude those? Do we avoid them? Or do we see them also as children of God and loved by God?

A final test of the Spirit is this: those who are in touch with God's Spirit are able to live joyfully and adventurously because they know that God is with them always. When we allow God's Spirit to 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.