Sunday, June 3, 2001
THE WIND AND THE SPIRIT
Acts 2:1-16

Children can ask the most profound questions and make startling comments using everyday words. A young child in a letter to God wrote, “Dear God, I had three stitches and a shot. I wish you would not make it so easy for people to come apart.” Another child said to God, “In Sunday School they told us what you do. Who does it when you are on vacation?” Here’s a deep philosophical question: “Dear God, how did you know you were God?” Another child asked, “Instead of letting people die, keep the ones you have now.” A little girl said, “Dear God, my brother told me about being born, but it doesn’t sound right.”

Today, as we Christians remember and celebrate Pentecost, which according to a story in the book of Acts, celebrates the power of God’s Spirit in and among us, these children’s comments and questions to God make me think of the many questions people have about the Holy Spirit. Here are a few: Where and what is the Holy Spirit? Is it something different from God? How can I tell if it’s God’s Spirit guiding me or something else?

The Bible provides a description of the Holy Spirit. In both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament, the term “Holy Spirit” is another way of speaking of God’s Spirit and specifically God’s activity. 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 moving throughout the universe that brings order out of chaos. In the same stories, we are told that God’s Spirit breathed into human beings the “breath of life.” In fact, the Hebrew word for wind, breath, and spirit is the same. The same is true in the Greek language. Near the end of his ministry, we are told that “Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.'”

In the New Testament accounts, after the resurrection of Jesus, there’s the story in the book of Acts, part of which was read earlier, about the followers of Jesus being gathered together in one place and their experience of the presence 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 in action, God’s love and power at work in all of creation and in and around us as human beings. It is not something separate from God. It is part of our understanding and experience of God. Sometimes we use similar language when talking about human beings. You might ask someone, “How’s your spirit this morning?” In other words, what kind of mood are you in? What’s your attitude, your outlook? Are you depressed or elated? When I speak of experiencing your spirit, I mean your personality or demeanor and your actions. It’s not something separate from you, but a part of you.

Here are some other things the Bible has to say about the Holy Spirit or God’s Spirit. God’s Spirit cannot be controlled by any one of us. Jesus said in one place, “God’s Spirit is like the wind. It blows where it chooses.” No denomination, sect, or individual has control of God’s Spirit. In a similar way, no one can control your spirit or mine unless you let them. Political prisoners and prisoners of war have said that although their bodies were in prison, their spirits were not.

The Bible also tells us that God's Spirit is in each one of us because each human being is created in God's image. It is God who breathes into each one of us the breath of life. Therefore, God's Spirit is present wherever people exist. As I said several weekends ago in the dialogue sermon with J. Ledo, good Christian missionaries go into a new place recognizing that God's Spirit is already there and work to help people recognize that Spirit and to learn to listen to God's Spirit for guidance, help, and comfort in their lives.

However, the big question always is: how can you distinguish the Spirit of God from false spirits that would lead you astray? Throughout history, individuals and groups have appeared and claimed they were speaking for God, that God's Spirit was telling them what to tell us or have us do. We are told in the Bible to "test the spirits to see whether or not they are of God."

You may have noticed the story in the local newspaper last week about the witch hunts and the killing of witches that took place in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692, and how it was done in the name of God's Spirit. The sincere religious people who supported the hanging of the alleged witches believed they were doing God's will and being guided by God's Spirit. Twenty women and men were hanged or crushed to death during the witch fever, fueled by a deep belief in the supernatural and political feuds.

The witch hysteria began when four young girls, including the daughter of the town's minister, the Rev. Samuel Parris, began dabbling in fortune-telling games with Tituba, a female slave of Parris. After showing strange symptoms, the town doctor concluded they were bewitched. Then the girls began naming people they suspected of inflicting their symptoms. Those who were initially named, including Tituba, lived on the edges of society. In time, however, the accusations spread to more prominent citizens, including Salem Village's former minister, George Burroughs, who was named by the girls as the master of all Massachusetts witches and leader of the Salem Coven. By the end of May 1692, about 200 people were jailed under charges of witchcraft.

The first to be tried was Bridget Bishop. She was found guilty and hanged in June 1692. In July, five women were hanged, and in August, five more.

A key to the trials was so-called spectral evidence, reports of ghostly presences inflicting torment under the command of suspected witches. As the executions increased, spectral evidence came under increasing criticism. Cotton Mather, minister of Boston's Old North Church and initially a believer in witchcraft, began to speak out against it. In September of 1692, the largest and last group of accused witches was hanged.

The thirst for prosecutions then waned, and the use of spectral evidence was eventually rejected.

History is filled with individuals and groups who have claimed to have a special revelation from God's Spirit. Some have attempted to predict exact dates for the end of the world, only to have the dates pass and nothing happen. An enormous amount of damage and bloodshed has occurred because of people who have misunderstood the nature of God's Holy Spirit.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Beware of false prophets; you will know them by their fruits." In another place in the New Testament, we are told to "test the spirits to see whether they are of God." A little later in the sermon, 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 go against the group, even when we are fearful that the group is headed in the wrong direction. Loyalty to a group can make it difficult to raise an embarrassing question or express a doubt or point out a weak argument.

Thus, someone is 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 the testimony of the Bible that God's Spirit is most often experienced in a group. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I also." It is significant that on the first Pentecost, when the followers of Jesus were together in one place, they most powerfully experienced the presence of God's Spirit.

In other aspects of life as well, we experience the power of the human spirit when we are together. We talk about the "spirit" of a group or the "school spirit" at events.

Music is especially important in experiencing the power of God's Spirit. It can lift our spirits, inspire us, and bind us together. That's why we put so much emphasis on music in our worship services, and why I'm so grateful for the many volunteers who give of their time and talent to enrich our worship.

Now let's discuss a few basic steps we can take to determine whether or not someone or some group that claims its actions are based on God's Spirit working through them have a right to that claim.

First, if someone or a group claims to have all the truth and the only truth, BEWARE! As I mentioned earlier, 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 said in another place, "I have many sheep who are not of this fold."

If a person, group, or church is filled with God's Spirit and being led by God's Spirit, it is always open to new possibilities, new truth, and new discoveries. If you are filled with God's Spirit, you will not be afraid of the latest Biblical scholarship, and you will not be threatened by new scientific theories and discoveries. Remember what Pastor John Robinson said to our Pilgrim mothers and fathers: "The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from His word."

Second, it is the testimony of the Bible that God's 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 and with all of creation.

The Pentecost story in the book of Acts reports that although there were people present from many different countries and ethnic groups, and many different languages, they could understand each other as if they were speaking one language. In other words, all barriers that had previously separated them disappeared. God's Spirit, which now united them, was more important than what divided them. It is the will of God's Spirit that we see all human beings as our sisters and brothers, no matter how different they might appear to be. Those leaders and groups that would lead us into narrowness, exclusiveness, and dogmatism do not have God's Spirit directing them.

Third, in his parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus 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 something to drink; I was a stranger, and you welcomed me; I was naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you took care of me; I was in prison, and you visited me."

It is one of the most basic tests of whether or not you are being led by God's Spirit — the way you treat people, especially those different from you, those who are the "down-and-outs" in our midst, those in trouble, those in need.

It's another way of saying what Paul wrote to the Galatians when he said, "Live by the Spirit." How will you know if you are living by the Spirit? He wrote: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

The Spirit of God, or that which we call the Holy Spirit, is already in you. It is ready to empower you. All you need to do is to be open to it and accept it. Amen.