Sunday, June 8, 2003
HOLY SPIRIT OR UNHOLY SPIRIT?
Acts 2:1-8,12-13

In last weekend's sermon, I mentioned the Apostle's Creed. I noted that it was not written by the apostles, but evolved over a period of years as a concise statement of some of the essential elements of Christian doctrine. Following that sermon, someone said to me, "When I was growing up, and we said the Apostle's Creed in church every week, there was one phrase that always puzzled me—'I believe in the Holy Ghost.' What is the Holy Ghost?"

This reminds me of a story about a young woman who had never been to a Christian worship service. One Sunday, she went to a Roman Catholic church with the family she was visiting. When they returned home, they asked her what she thought of the worship service. She said it was okay, but there was one thing that really puzzled her. She said, "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 members of the early church were not clear in their understanding of the Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit. According to the book of Acts, when Paul arrived in 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." (Acts 19:1-2)

There remains a lot of confusion about the idea of the Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit. One young person said to me recently, "If there is a Holy Spirit, doesn't that imply that there is also an unholy spirit?" I replied, "That's a very insightful comment. There are 'unholy spirits.' The Bible mentions them all the time. Sometimes they are called 'unclean spirits.' And in the first letter of John, the writer advises his readers, 'Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God.'" (1 John 4:1)

"Spirit" is always difficult to describe or define or understand, and this is true whether you are talking about the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Christmas, school spirit, unclean spirits, or any other kind.

When the early church tried to explain its experience of the Holy Spirit, which is remembered on the day of Pentecost and celebrated 50 days after Easter, various figures of speech or metaphors were used. They said it was "like tongues of fire," meaning it gave them energy, motivation, and power, and "like a mighty wind," which is another kind of energy. It was an attempt to describe something indescribable with words alone.

The best way to describe the "Holy Spirit," from a Christian point of view, is to say that after the resurrection of Jesus, when the early followers could no longer see him or touch him, his presence and love were still with them, and they called it the "Holy Spirit." One ancient Christian creed says it this way: "We believe in the Holy Spirit, God's presence with us for guidance, for comfort, and for strength."

It's important to remember that this Spirit of God has always been with God's followers. In the Old Testament of the Bible, long before the birth of Jesus, the term "Holy Spirit" was another way of speaking of God's Spirit or God's creative activity at work in the world. It was 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. In the same story, you are also told that God breathed into human beings the “breath of life,” which implies that God breathed God’s Spirit into human beings. The Hebrew word for wind, breath, and spirit is the same word. In the New Testament, the Greek word is similar. At one point in his ministry, the Bible says, “Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.'”

Because the Holy Spirit is difficult to describe and because it’s something you cannot control, there has usually been some controversy about the Holy Spirit within the church.

In the very early church, for example, 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 tests to determine whether or not someone 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 this country, there have been 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.

Holy Spirit or unholy spirit? How can you tell the difference between them? Some unholy spirits are easy to identify. Excessive pride is an unholy spirit. Envy is an unholy spirit. Hate is an unholy spirit. Sloth is an unholy spirit. Lust is an unholy spirit. Jesus said, “Beware of false prophets. You will know them by their fruits.” Unholy spirits lead you into doing things you shouldn’t be doing.

Other unholy spirits are more difficult to discern. History is filled with stories of individuals and groups who claim to be speaking for God’s Spirit, but later events proved them false.

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 hear so-called prophets claim they had God’s Spirit speaking through them. That Spirit had revealed to them that on February 1, the Thames River would rise from its banks, flood the entire city, and sweep away 10,000 homes.

This vision was described in terrifying detail to increasingly larger groups. It began 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. More and more people began to believe these predictions, even though the Thames had always been the most docile of rivers.

People 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. They were joined by their 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 prophets had predicted the river would rise slowly, allowing those who could run fast enough to escape. The

hour came, and to the consternation of the watchers, nothing happened. The tide ebbed and flowed, ebbed and flowed, as it always had.

The next morning, with the Thames continuing to flow peacefully within its banks, the crowd that had stayed behind was then joined by the returning evacuees, and they were angry. Many wanted to throw the prophets into the river. Fortunately, the prophets were prepared. They said they had carefully rechecked their calculations the previous night and had found a small error. London was most certainly doomed; the signs were undeniably right. But because of a minor oversight, the great flood was now scheduled for the following century. London could go home and be safe for at least 100 more years.

Unfortunately, religious history especially is filled with individuals and groups who claim to have a unique experience of God's Holy Spirit and therefore have knowledge of the future, which you do not have.

Why are people so easily led astray by unholy spirits? When you are part of a group, your desire for security, for being accepted and affirmed, can lead to your unwillingness to stand alone, even when you are fearful that the group is headed in the wrong direction. Loyalty to the group can keep you from asking embarrassing questions. Someone is frequently needed in a group, like the child in Hans Christian Andersen's story, "The Emperor's New Clothes," who said, "But he's got nothing on."

What makes it more complicated is that God's Holy Spirit is more likely to be experienced when faithful people are gathered together. The Spirit in a group can be empowering, life-sustaining, and inspiring. The church 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, in a group or congregation, there are conflicting voices, each claiming to be following God's Spirit. How do you know whether it is holy or unholy?

Some of the usual tests you might use for other activities may not be valid. For example, merely because a group is fast-growing or successful in terms of numbers in the short run does not mean it has the truth and is being led by the Holy Spirit. Large groups of people have been deceived for short and even longer periods of time, only to discover they have been misled.

In Germany before and during the Second World War, the churches that cooperated and affirmed what Hitler was doing prospered, while the anti-Nazi church was small, suspect, and persecuted. During the early civil rights movement, the churches that defended slavery and later defended segregation often prospered and grew. Many of the churches that challenged slavery and opposed segregation suffered.

What then are some valid ways to test the spirits to see if it is the Holy Spirit or an unholy spirit?

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.

A church or group led by God's Spirit is open to new possibilities, new discoveries, and is not afraid of the latest Biblical research, nor is it threatened by new scientific theories or

discoveries. Pastor John Robinson told our Congregational Church ancestors, “Remember, 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 Holy Spirit is always calling you to wholeness and to seeing the world and creation as interdependent. God’s Holy Spirit is that which draws you out of yourself and helps you to see your connections with other people who are different from you and to recognize your shared humanity.

It is significant that on the first Pentecost, when God’s Holy Spirit was being experienced by the followers of Jesus and others with them, they all sensed a oneness, a unity. Although people were present from many different countries and ethnic groups, and they spoke different languages, they could understand each other as if they were all speaking one language. All barriers that had previously divided them were overcome. What united them was more important than what divided them. God’s Holy Spirit always leads to increased inclusiveness, whereas an unholy spirit leads to exclusiveness.

The Apostle Paul had this to say about telling the difference between the work of the Holy Spirit and an unholy spirit. He said, and I’m paraphrasing: “The works of unholy spirits are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, and things like these… By contrast, the works of the Holy Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

If you are letting the Spirit of God guide you, then you are able to live joyfully and adventurously. Then you also know that there is only one truly significant work to do in life, and that is to love — to love nature, to love people, to love animals, to love creation itself. You do this by serving others with generosity and compassion. Amen.