Sunday, May 30, 2004
SPIRIT OF GOD
Acts 2:1-4,12-15

In what ways are human beings and the Spirit of God connected?

One of the most extraordinary statements in the Old Testament of the Bible about our relationship to the Spirit of God as human beings is found in the book of Genesis: “So God formed human beings from the dust of the ground and breathed into them the breath of life, and they became living creatures.”

One of the most extraordinary promises in the New Testament about our relationship to the Spirit of God as human beings is found in the promise Jesus made to his followers before Good Friday and Easter. The promise was that they would not be alone once he was gone from them. They would experience the power of God’s Holy Spirit in and among them with a new understanding.

How this promise was fulfilled is told in two different stories in the New Testament. The first story is found in the book of Acts. On the day of Pentecost, a religious holiday, the followers of Jesus were all together in one place. In that gathering, something unusual and unexpected took place. They felt the power of the Spirit of God within them and among them, as Jesus had promised.

It is no accident that in his choice of metaphors to describe the event, Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, compared the Spirit of God to the “rush of a mighty wind, and it filled the house where they were sitting.” He also described the Spirit of God as being like fire. When he wrote his gospel, Luke also said that the Spirit of God descended on Jesus like a dove.

The second account of the experience of the Spirit of God following Good Friday and Easter is found in the gospel of John. Here we are told that the followers of Jesus were gathered together on the evening of Easter Sunday, and the doors were locked because they were still afraid of those who had crucified Jesus. These frightened followers had heard rumors about the resurrection of Jesus.

All of a sudden, in the midst of that frightened group, Jesus appeared among them. “Peace be with you,” he said. Then he showed them the scars on his hands and side. After that, he commissioned them to continue the work he had started. He told them, “As God has sent me, even so I send you.”

Then, according to John’s story, he did something which might at first seem strange to you: “He breathed on them, and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.'” Strange to you? He breathed on them and connected that act with their experiencing the Spirit of God! Remember, in the beginning of this sermon, that quotation from the creation story in Genesis: “Then God formed humankind from the dust of the ground and breathed into them the breath of life!”

It is significant that in the Hebrew language, which is the original language of the Old Testament, the word for “spirit” is the same as the word for “wind” or “breath.” Also, in the Greek language, which is the original language of the New Testament, “spirit” has the same root as “air” or “breath.” Jesus also described the Spirit of God as being like the wind, which blows where it will.

Now you can understand why our ancestors in the faith believed that the breath of God was the Spirit of God. In creating human beings, God breathed into us the “breath of life,” meaning God was breathing into us the Spirit of God.

Our ancestors in the faith also believed that as far as human beings are concerned, breath and life are inseparable. It’s not too difficult to understand how they arrived at this conclusion. Without breath, there is no life. When you die, you stop breathing.

At birth, life outside the mother’s womb begins with the baby breathing on its own. Its heart has already been beating inside the womb for many months, but the baby has not been breathing on its own. The necessary supply of oxygen until birth comes through the umbilical cord. Thus, there is an intimate connection between life and breath.

So, the creation story tells you that God breathed into each one of you the breath of life. And with that breath comes the Spirit of God.

Connected to this idea, for our ancestors in the faith, a mouth-to-mouth kiss was especially intimate because it was the sharing of each other’s breath, which they believed was also the sharing of each other’s spirit or soul.

The gospel of John’s version of Jesus breathing on his followers and telling them they were receiving a new infusion of the Spirit of God is a kind of retelling of the story of creation. Jesus is re-creating his followers. How is he doing it? By reminding and renewing within them the Spirit of God, which in the deepest sense, they already had because they were created in the image of God.

He breathed on them. It was the breath of God, the Spirit of God, which is the breath of life. Each one of you has within you the breath of life from God.

The story of Pentecost in the book of Acts tells you even more about this remarkable gift of the Spirit of God. On that day, the Bible says, “They were all together in one place.” Even more important, people were there from every nation on earth. What’s the symbolism here? It tells you that the gift of the Spirit of God, which includes the unconditional love of God as expressed in the coming of Jesus, is for everyone in the world.

The story of Pentecost is a re-emphasis of the fact that all the nations, all people everywhere, are represented when the Spirit of God is poured out again.

The implications of this story are incredible. All nations and people of the earth are not only the destination of the good news of Jesus; they are also the point of origin. Where did it begin? The Europeans can say, “With us, we were there when it started.” The Africans can say, “We were there when it began.” According to the story in Acts, people from every nation under heaven were there when it started.

This means that no one group of people or nation can say with certainty, “It belonged to us, and now we are going to give it to you through our evangelism and mission work.” All of us were represented in that crowd of people on the first Pentecost. In the same way, God has breathed into each and every human being the breath of life, and with it, the Spirit of God.

Pentecost removes all grounds for any kind of arrogance and superiority that frequently infects the church when one group of Christians gets the notion that salvation and the Spirit of God belong to them and only they can give it to others as if they have a monopoly on the Spirit of God.

There is no evidence anywhere that God only breathed the breath of life into one kind of people, race, or nation. God's Spirit is breathed into each one of us everywhere from the moment of our birth.

One reason that I have stayed in the ministry for almost 50 years now, even though at times I've been discouraged and even ashamed because of what we human beings have done to each other in the name of God, is because I believe so strongly that it is the purpose of the church to tell all people that they are created in God's image and that the Spirit of God dwells in them. I want people to live up to what they were meant to be. I want people to know that the loving Spirit of God is always at work in the world and in them. Many times people are not aware of it until later.

When China was closed to the United States and other western nations in 1959, there were six hundred thousand Protestant Christians and about one million Roman Catholic Christians in China. When China was reopened in 1979, there were more than three million Protestant Christians and more than three million Roman Catholic Christians, and we weren't over there telling people about the good news of God's unconditional love. How did that happen? The story of creation and the story of Pentecost both tell you that the beginning point as well as the destination point of the Spirit of God is the whole world. Every human being is created in the image of God, and the Spirit of God is present within each person. That Spirit is always at work in creation, with our help and without our help.

Although the Spirit of God, which we call the Holy Spirit, is within each human being from birth, it can become dormant. You can cover it up or not pay attention to it, or forget it is there. Therefore, it needs to be rediscovered, or you need to be reminded that it is there. That's why Jesus "breathed" on the disciples. He was reawakening that spirit, which was already present in them. I believe that's also what happened in the Pentecost story in the book of Acts. The people in that crowd from many nations heard the good news of God's love in their own language, and it rekindled the Spirit of God, which was already in them. It happens over and over again.

The power of love can have the same effect because it is an expression of the Spirit of God. I know a ministerial colleague who has the tradition of asking the bride and groom to write each other a love letter several weeks before the wedding takes place. He tells them to write privately and not show the letters to anyone, not even to each other. He has them seal it in an envelope, and each gives the letter to him. He then gets their permission to read the letters and to select excerpts from their letters to read as part of the wedding sermon. Invariably, the letters are very moving.

In one letter, the groom wrote about how his bride-to-be loved him and the effect that love had. He wrote that her love was most amazing because she loved him as he was — imperfections, male foibles, and all. That was amazing enough, but even more wondrous was the fact that her unconditional love had this power of pulling him to grow to be more worthy of it. Her love did this without ever implying that he wasn't worthy of it. Her unquestioning love took him as he was, but somehow nudged him to be a better person without ever saying there was anything wrong with him.

The Bible calls the Spirit of God the breath of God and the breath of life. It is within each one of you, and when you love unconditionally, it is that Spirit of God at work. It has a unique power to call forth the best within you and others.

Perhaps you have forgotten about this power in you. Maybe you are not paying attention to it, or maybe you think you can live without it.

There is a story told about the boxer Muhammad Ali, back in the days when he was young, loud, and brash. He was on an airplane when the flight attendant noticed that his seatbelt was not fastened. “Would you please fasten your seatbelt, sir?” she said. He gave her a look of defiance and said, “Superman doesn’t need any seatbelt.” She smiled and replied, “Superman doesn’t need any airplane.” He needed both. We all have the Spirit of God, and we need to let it work in and through us. Then amazing things happen. Amen.