

## THE PROMISE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

John 14:15-21

By Emily Laurel

<sup>15</sup> "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. <sup>17</sup> This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. <sup>18</sup> "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. <sup>19</sup> In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. <sup>20</sup> On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. <sup>21</sup> They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

It is with certainty that I can declare that the Holy Spirit is abroad in the world doing the work of encouragement, consolation, advocacy, and peace-making as promised by Jesus. I know it to be so and point now to just one fact that I believe shows the Spirit at work in our own church.

Listen to this. Thirty-two people have joined our church over the past year (25 adults and 7 baptized children). That is almost six times the national average for similar sized churches. This extraordinary growth in our membership is a clear example of the movement of Holy Spirit in our church.

That is an excellent reason to celebrate! So, pick out something red to wear and mark your calendar for Sunday, June 8, when we have our annual Pentecost Party! Each year we gather to celebrate God's gift of the Holy Spirit, bestowed on the disciples on the Day of Pentecost and continuing to this day as Spirit lives in us all. Let's make this year a great celebration. We have much to celebrate!

As I prepared to write this sermon, it was with the awareness that today's emphasis in Christianity seems to be almost completely on Jesus Christ, with the third person

of the Trinity scarcely mentioned unless it is Pentecost Sunday or there is direct mention of the third person of the Trinity in the sermon text.

Why do you suppose this would be? According to a commentary by Karoline Lewis, a lot of us don't quite know what to do with or think about the "shy member" of the Trinity—the Holy Spirit.

Howard Rice is far more specific in his book, **Reformed Spirituality**, a book about the historical development of spirituality among people of the Reformed faith. He explains that most Reformed Christians do not recognize and are not taught the spiritual traditions of our heritage. Most remain silent about their religious experiences for fear of ridicule or rejection and may even leave their church to become part of the "believing without belonging" subculture. The world's way of knowing and its criteria for evaluating what is real and important do not seem to allow for a divine presence such as Holy Spirit.

When I received my invitation to fill the pulpit today, the first thing I did was read the lectionary scriptures for the Sixth Sunday of Easter. The Gospel reading was John 14:15-21, which introduces the Holy Spirit for the first time since Old Testament times.

Our focus today is on Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, which is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, also called the Triune God. First, let me share my perspective on Holy Spirit and explain why I am so happy to have been invited to preach for you on this particular Sunday. Then we will go through the scripture for today. Finally, I have some questions and maybe some answers for you.

For many years before my family's move to Benton from the Houston area, I considered myself a spiritual person even though I did not attend any church regularly. I was raised in the Presbyterian Church and remained true to my Christian upbringing through my connection with Holy Spirit. Through the years certain experiences solidified my sure knowledge of Holy Spirit's reality. I rejoice in my heart for these experiences, which I hope to share with you someday.

And, second, in 1994 Connecting Spirit, my partnership with my sister, Turner Bourne, began its existence as an event planning firm dedicated to bringing spiritual leaders to the Houston area. Several years later I co-founded the Houston Holistic Chamber of Commerce, a nonprofit organization with spiritual underpinnings. Through these organizations, along with my Reiki teaching and healing practice, and occasional invitations to preach at area churches, I became part of a community of people from many walks of life and spiritual paths. What brought us together and what we had in common was an awareness and connection to the Divine Source of All Creation. Called by many names, but most often called God or Spirit or Divine Spirit by Christians and non-Christians, I speak of Holy Spirit.

In Old Testament times the Holy Trinity appears first in Genesis 1:26, when God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are conversing about making man in the image of God. When I read that verse, I was amazed. It reads, "Then God said, "Let **us** make human kind in **our** image, according to **our** likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So, Spirit was at work long before the birth of Jesus Christ. There are other examples from Old Testament times, such as when Holy Spirit filled Samson, King David, and Elijah as well.

We'll turn now to the first mention of Holy Spirit in the New Testament, which is in the Gospel of John, the fourth book of the New Testament. Written around 60 years after the crucifixion of Jesus, the Gospel of John in Verses 14:15-21 Jesus introduces the disciples to the third person of the Holy Trinity, called the Paraclete or Holy Spirit.

John describes what happens during that Thursday evening in the dark days before the crucifixion. On what is now called Maundy Thursday, the night Jesus is betrayed, he is sitting in the upper room with several disciples as they quietly share a somber meal.

**Imagine with me for a moment stepping into the world of Jesus Christ and his disciples.** Consider first the disciples. They must have been filled with grief,

despair, and great anxiety at the thought of Jesus' looming death. They are gathered with Jesus at the table, listening to his farewell words. Their occasional questions reveal their confusion and uncertainty. And they must have been wondering what will become of them once Jesus is gone.

**Now consider Jesus Christ.** Jesus is deeply reluctant to leave his followers behind. He loves them and will miss them. He shares the suffering and pain of their upcoming separation. He wishes to console them and to fill them with hope and determination for an uncertain future. His tone as he speaks is reassuring and encouraging.

(Please feel free to follow along with me in your bibles as we explore these scriptures.)

As Jesus attempts to relieve the troubled hearts of the disciples, he begins to speak. Saying:

<sup>15</sup> **If you love me, you will keep my commandments.** Actually, I would prefer to look at this command as a sign of love rather than as a condition of love. I believe that the love Jesus speaks of is a bond of commitment and self-offering called devotion!

<sup>16</sup> **And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to be with you forever.** This demand for obedience is tempered with the promise of the divine presence to be with those who love Jesus and obey his word. The divine presence is known to us as Holy Spirit. Other names for Holy Spirit are counselor, advocate, or the least known, which is paraclete.

Calling Holy Spirit another advocate does not mean he is another Jesus. Jesus promises after his return to the Father that the Spirit will remain with the disciples; however, this does not mean Holy Spirit replaced Jesus.

<sup>17</sup> **This is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.** Jesus names this advocate "The Spirit of Truth," as he explains that the

Spirit of Truth will dwell with those who love and obey him. Although the world does not know or recognize the divine presence, the disciples do.

<sup>18</sup> **I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.** In their time together Jesus has served as an advocate and counselor and now comforts the disciples with the promise of another advocate to be with and in them forever. This "other advocate" is God's great gift for the meanwhile, which means that the Christian community can live without losing their source of inspiration, guidance, and advocacy. What the disciples cherish, what sustains them and undergirds their life together, and what keeps them from being orphaned is a reality that the world cannot discern.

A commentary by Craig Koester helped me to understand these verses. He says, "Why would anyone believe that authentic life comes from a Jesus who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, a Jesus they cannot see?" The honest answer is that virtually no one would believe it—apart from the work of the Spirit.

Love comes through an encounter with another person. The same is true of faith. If faith is a relationship with the living Christ and the living God who sent him, then faith can only come through an encounter with them. And the Spirit is the one who makes this presence known.

<sup>19</sup> **In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.** <sup>20</sup> **On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.** In other words, Jesus promises that the disciples will know this indwelling presence in a way that the world cannot.

<sup>21</sup> **They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.** Through these verses flows the promise of the continuing presence of Christ through another advocate, yet unidentified. Identification of the advocate as Holy Spirit does not occur until Verse 26 of Chapter 14, when Jesus promises that the advocate will be sent by the Father in Jesus' name to teach them everything.

**This completes our look at today's scripture.** According to Andrew Greeley, priest and sociologist, the message in these verses was intended primarily for the early Christians who believed in Jesus, but you can be sure that this message is intended for us as well. Why? Because you and I are as much individual sparks in the body of Christ as Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John.

I wish I had time to share more of what I am learning about Holy Spirit, and I do have some questions for you.

First, let me ask you, what do you suppose Holy Spirit looks like? Well, I believe he looks like an advocate, which is someone who stands up for you when you need it, speaks on your behalf, lends a helping hand, takes your side, and won't leave you while you're down. And Holy Spirit looks like Jesus. Anytime someone stands up for another or acts like Jesus would or bears the love of Christ for another, you've seen Holy Spirit. Or Holy Spirit might look like you.

I invite you to recall the last time you looked in the mirror and consider that you were looking into the face of Holy Spirit. Why? how? Because at one time or another Holy Spirit has looked a lot like you, even a lot like me, and definitely like each and every one of us as we are living our lives, loving and serving God.

Hopefully, the next time you look in the mirror you'll consider where you will be seeing Holy Spirit in the days to come. Hopefully, you'll notice when you see Holy Spirit in action in your life and in the lives of those around you as you further develop your awareness and appreciation of Holy Spirit's movement in your life and the lives of the people around you.

Second, how can we deepen our understanding of the Trinity and of Holy Spirit? There are many ways to deepen our understanding of our Mighty Triune God. Our God-- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--is an awesome God, and the more we immerse ourselves in seeking understanding and insight into the power and glory and love and grace, the more our spiritual natures mature. This is a lifelong process for those hungry for spiritual food.

Know in your heart that we are never left alone or without insight, for Holy Spirit speaks within our lives, giving us guidance and courage as we seek to be faithful to God's vision in today's world. Even if you are not noticing the movement of Holy Spirit in your life, persist in your spiritual journey! Remember, Mother Teresa of Calcutta did not feel the presence of Christ for more than half her life. In spite of the dark she continued to be faithful. Even though she had not been gifted with spiritual certainty, she steadfastly pursued the mission to which she believed she had been called.

Above all, believe that Holy Spirit gives you and me an inner voice and energy for our spiritual journeys just as much as the people received at Jesus's side before his death and resurrection and afterward on the day of Pentecost.

Rejoice with me now for this precious gift of Holy Spirit as we pray.

**Prayer:** Every day let us open our hearts to the activity of Holy Spirit in our lives, let us spend time in quiet listening for that still, small voice; let us see, hear, sense, feel, or simply know the presence of Holy Spirit; let us recognize when we are being called by God and choose to take action with sure knowledge that our guidance comes from Holy Spirit.