

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
 East Moline, Illinois
 Pastor Becky Sherwood
May 11, 2008, Pentecost
 Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Acts 2:1-21
YOU DO KNOW THE HOLY SPIRIT OF GOD!

I want to start this morning with a story I told you many years ago. It is a story for all of you that endured “Math Phobia” when you were in school.”

A friend of a friend of mine did OK with math until she reached algebra in the 7th grade. And then her world fell apart.

Algebra was consuming her life, taking her free time,
 crushing her self-esteem and disturbing her sleep.

This continued until the day that her mother sat down with her at their kitchen table, her checkbook in her hand.

And her wise mother said to her daughter: “There is no such thing as algebra.”

(Now for those of you who still used algebraic equations in your work or in school, and for those of you who loved algebra like I did, please just stick with the story)

Her mother said, “There is no such thing as algebra.”

All you will ever do in your life is add and subtract to balance your checkbook each month. And you are really good at adding and subtracting.

So do your best in class, and then let it go,
 because we love you no matter what grade you get in algebra.
 And there really is no such thing as algebra.”

While “Math Phobia” has become recognized as a real fear that some people live with, and there is now help for them, I’d like to suggest this morning that there is another Phobia that is still, more often than not, kept under cover.

It is usually only in small groups, or one-on-one that people may confess they have this phobia.

And they rarely confess it to their pastor because they fear the judgment and retribution that will follow.

Many people suffer in silence through the years, dreading that day when someone finds out.

So, what is this phobia that cripples so many? I like to call it “The Holy Spirit Phobia.”

How many times have you said, or heard someone else say, “I understand God and Jesus, but I just don’t understand the Holy Spirit?” Or, “usually, I just ignore the Holy Spirit when I think about God.”

Or, “I’ve had the Holy Spirit explained to me over and over again, but I just don’t get it.”

Now unlike that wise mother with her checkbook, I am not going to come to you with my Bible and say “There is no such thing as the Holy Spirit, just focus on God and Jesus.”

Instead, I’m going to come to you with my Bible and the story of Pentecost saying: God’s Holy Spirit does exist, the Spirit is one of the ways we know God, and I’m pretty sure you’ve already met. In fact, you have probably already communicated with each other, more than you can even imagine.

But, for many of us, we have not experienced the Holy Spirit in the same
 “shock and awe” of that first Pentecost,

when the Holy Spirit descended on the newborn Christian Church.

Unlike those men and women who'd followed Jesus, most of us haven't experienced the roaring of a mighty wind, or tongues of flame touching down on our heads.

But I am convinced God's Holy Spirit is with you because the Holy Spirit of God comes into our hearts and lives when we are baptized. God's Spirit lives within us because God loves us!

I believe you've had experiences that you may not have labelled as involving God's Holy Spirit, and yet the Holy Spirit was right there!

Have you ever been singing a hymn in church, or listening to a sermon, and you feel like the words were written especially for you?

That is the Holy Spirit speaking to you through someone else's thoughts and words.

Or maybe you've been on one of our committees planning a learning, worship or fellowship event. As you collaborate together, everyone's ideas come together into a plan that one of you alone could never have created. And all of you are excited about the plans you've made.

That is the Holy Spirit using each of your individual God-given gifts to care for the entire church.

Or have there been times when you are alone or in church, singing *How Great Thou Art*, *Jesus Loves Me*, *Here I Am Lord*, or *Lord You Have Come to the Lakeshore*, and you become aware of a loving presence so much bigger than yourself. You may even find yourself weeping. I think it's pretty common to have those songs that touch us in our heart of hearts.

Or you're at a Bible Study or Spirituality Group and you realize how God's message really is a part of your life. It's one of those times that everything clicks and you know are learning something new about God.

That is the Holy Spirit helping your spirit know God, and praise God with all of your heart.

That is God's Holy Spirit reminding you that God is right there with you.

Our experiences of nature often bring us close to God. Have you ever:
Had a really early Tee Time and watched the sun begin to rise over the golf course?,
Or the sunrise, or moon rise, over farm fields, or the Mississippi River or over the ocean?
Or have you ever been hiking and the strong silence and the deep peace of the woods, or the mountains, overwhelms you and God is right there with you?

That is the Holy Spirit showing you the power, majesty and beauty of our God.

That is God speaking to you and loving you through the gift of creation.

That is also the Holy Spirit reminding you that in the grand scheme of things we are very small, and our great big God knows us by name, and loves us with a great big love.

God's love is right there for us, all the time, and the Holy Spirit helps us know that.

Our experiences with other people often bring us close to the Spirit of God.
Have you ever been thinking about a friend, and they call you? Or you're having a really bad day and a friend calls and says they felt like they just had to call you.

That is the Holy Spirit connecting us, through the love of Jesus Christ, to those people we love, and who love us.

I've told you this next story of this before in a sermon, and in a couple Adult Education Classes, because it is a story of the Holy Spirit that really affected my life. In my last church I was at a church member's home with Shirley as her husband Louie was dying. Louie's sister was there from the east coast and she was a very devout Catholic.

Within less than a minute of Louie dying the doorbell rang.

It was the town's Catholic priest who was as surprised as I was.

He said he'd been driving by Shirley's street and felt that he had to stop to see the family.

It was such a comfort to Louie's sister to have the familiar Catholic prayers prayed over the body of her brother within a minute of his dying.

Father Tom and I talked about that incident many times afterwards. For the two of us as pastors this was one of those "shock and awe" moments with the Holy Spirit of God, caring for a child of God and his family at the moment of his death.

The Bible says we are able to love others because Jesus loved us first.

When your child or grandchild wraps his, or her arms around your neck and squeezes you with all their might, God's Spirit is present.

When your child says Mommy or Daddy for the first time, when you're reunited with family or friends you haven't seen for a long time, when you sneak in at night to watch your children sleep, when you hold your grandchild for the first time, when you realize how much a friendship means to you, God's Holy Spirit is present.

We love because God first loved us.

God's Spirit is also with us when we "walk through the valley of the shadow of death."

When we've lost a loved one, or we've been diagnosed with a critical or terminal illness, or we sit with a family member as they hear the word "cancer" for the first time, God's Spirit is there.

That deep sense of comfort, even in the midst of despair, is God's Holy Spirit caring for us.

So many of you have told me that you can feel the prayers of your church family while you're in the hospital, or making a tough decision, or recovering from a serious illness.

That is the Holy Spirit connecting our hearts and lives.

We carry God's Spirit in our hearts, and when we care for others, God's Spirit is at work through us, for others.

When it's 2:00 a.m. and you've finally admitted to yourself how scared you are, or how sad you are, or how alone you feel, and you cry out to God for help,

That is the Holy Spirit who brings you deep calm and comfort.

That is the Holy Spirit who holds onto you as you get all the stored-up tears out,

That is the Holy Spirit who convinces you, contrary to all evidence, that you are not alone and are in fact deeply loved by God.

In times of great joy, the Holy Spirit is rushing around, even if you don't hear the wind, and see the tongues of flame.

At the birth of your child, or grandchild, or brother or sister the loving Holy Spirit of God is right there!

In the joyful memories of this church: In the playfulness and great message from our puppets, or our children marching with Palms on Palm Sunday the Holy Spirit of God is there. When the church moved up the hill and entered this building when it was new, when you welcomed new pastors and new members into the church, when the bells or the choir's anthems touch us so deeply, when our Vacation Bible School children lead us in singing, the Spirit of God is there.

It is especially when we are involved in mission that God's Spirit is present, moving through us to reach out to others. Those of you that were on the Mexico Mission trip, or the trips down to help victims of Katrina, have told stories of feeling God with you. And feeling that God was caring for you through the people you were helping.

When we see a need in our community, like the school supplies for children, or winter coats for the homeless, or games for kids at Kemmerer Village or Arrowhead Ranch, or food for the Watertown Food Pantry, God's Spirit is working through us.

When you serve God by serving others, the Holy Spirit of God is right there in the midst of all that you are doing.

Finally, I think it also needs to be said that God's Holy Spirit is present in times of quiet and rest. If you've sat alone enjoying the birds in your back yard, or the waves at the ocean, the gentle ripples of a stream, the sound of wind through the growing grain, or sat in silence before worship begins, or sat in silence at a Taizé Worship Service or with a spirituality group, and felt the strong peace of those moments, the Holy Spirit is there.

God's Spirit is there in worship, in learning, in joy, in sorrow, and in service. The Holy Spirit is there in our friendships and families; in the powerful messages of creation and the joyful celebrations of our lives. When we are caring for someone or someone is caring for us, when we walk the valley of the shadow of death, and when we are filled up with joy, the Holy Spirit of God is there.

It is my hope for you this morning that those of you who share in the Holy Spirit Phobia will begin to realize that the Holy Spirit of God has been there all along. It seems that sometimes we just need to re-label experiences as being Holy Spirit moments.

You were baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our three in one God promises to walk with each of us, live in our hearts, and guard and guide our steps.

May we, like those earliest Christians, hear the ways our God is calling us to be this generation's messengers of the Good News.

And may our God--Father, Son and Holy Spirit--continue to lovingly shape us into daughters and sons of the living God, so that we can share the Good News of Jesus' saving love, and give that love away! Amen.