

RECEIVE – PERCEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT

John 14:8-17,25-27, Acts 2:1-21, Romans 8:14-17

Little Alivia Miles, Daniel Rodriguez and Hannah Bembridge, after they are baptized this morning, will each receive the anointing of the sweet smelling oil of chrism with the sign of the cross on their foreheads and these words of great promise: “*You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.*” As the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove at his baptism, so we believe that the indwelling power and presence of God’s Holy Spirit is God’s gift to each of us in our baptisms.

But how do we know that we truly have the Holy Spirit in us? After all we can’t see the Spirit. We can’t touch the Spirit. In fact it’s hard to know even when we do recognize something of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives exactly where our own intentions, actions and thoughts leave off and the Holy Spirit’s begin. How can we recognize the Holy Spirit alive and active in our life and faith?

There are over a thousand references to God’s Spirit in the scriptures so we will not begin to touch on all the ways that God’s Spirit is alive and active in the world and in our own lives. But the scripture lessons we read today are all pretty powerful examples of the Spirit’s action and power; they are a good place for us to begin.

The most dramatic by far is the example of Pentecost Sunday when the Spirit shook the house with a mighty wind where the disciples were gathered and filled each one of them enabling them to communicate the good news of God in a wide variety of languages. The Spirit’s work was to communicate and further the message of Good News in Jesus Christ. The Spirit worked powerfully and indeed miraculously in those disciples. And the Spirit of God continued that work in them as they went out and continued to proclaim the good news of new life in Jesus Christ to all the world, to every nation and language and people.

In our reading from the Gospel of John Jesus was telling his disciples that he was going away from them. Our reading skips from verse 17 to verse 25, but in the first of the skipped verses, v. 18, Jesus puts it very plainly. “*I will not leave you orphaned.*” Jesus tells them that he is going away from them to be with God the Father, but God will give them the Holy Spirit as the “*Paraclete*” (the word means a legal advocate), one who will be with them and remind them, nudge them to remember Jesus’ words and to follow his commandments. So, the Spirit’s work is to be Jesus’ representative. The Spirit would remind them and connect them to Jesus’ and the Father’s living presence. Following his resurrection Jesus appeared to his disciples in the Upper Room and breathed on them and in that action told them to “*receive the Holy Spirit.*”

The Spirit’s living presence is assumed by Paul in our short readings from Romans. But I love what he tells us the Spirit will do for us. God’s Spirit will help us recall that we are no longer slaves but sons and daughters of the living God. God has adopted each of us as his beloved children and the Spirit reminds us of this intimate connection, helping us to claim that relationship and call God *our Father, Abba, “our daddy.”* A little further on

Paul tells us that the Spirit of God also prays for us when we ourselves don't know what to say "*with sighs too deep for words.*" (Rom. 8:26)

So, God's Spirit is a powerful force at work in us, helping us to proclaim and share with all people the good news of new life in Jesus. God's Spirit is a force to continue Jesus' life and teaching, to help us continue in his living presence. God's Spirit also helps to remind us *who* we are and *whose* we are. We belong to God; we are his own adopted children. And God's Spirit is at work helping us and praying for us.

Those are just a few of the wonderful ways that the Holy Spirit is at work. The challenge for us is to recognize the Holy Spirit's presence and perceive what the Holy Spirit is doing. And in the confusing muddle of our busy lives that's often not very easy to see. Alan Jones, former Dean of Grace Church Cathedral in San Francisco, once warned that "*only a fool would pray for the Holy Spirit.*" And "*only fools for Christ do.*" He suggested that the Spirit is most active at three open spaces in our lives: "*in the unpredictable, in the place of risk and in those areas over which we have no control.*" (Homiletics Magazine, May, 2007, p. 34-35)

Looking at your life what have been some of those unpredictable places in which you can see the Holy Spirit at work? Wednesday morning a young man turned up in the church asking for help when I arrived for the 7:00 a.m. worship service. My sermon that morning had to do with the ways God's Spirit advocates for us when we are in need, so with nudging from my own sermon it occurred to me that maybe I should be part of God's action to help this young man. As full as my agenda already was for that morning I had better let it be interrupted. The young man was working as a *roustabout* for an amusement park company that was on the road setting up rides for carnivals. He'd been working for them about a month, but had not yet been paid. On the road to the next job he was sent to get coffee, but when he got back to the truck they were gone. They had abandoned him leaving him high and dry without money and no resources to get back to his wife and three children in Florida. Through the generosity of this congregation for the Rector's Discretionary Fund I had the resources to buy him a bus ticket home. What a surprising way for the Holy Spirit to help me start my day! It is in just such unpredictable ways that we can often see God's Spirit at work. Alan Jones also suggested that we are likely to discern the Spirit's presence in the place of risk and in areas over which we have no control. Where is the place of risk in your life? And what are some of those things over which you have no control in which the Holy Spirit may be present and active?

While Jesus promised that God would send the Holy Spirit to be our advocate and connect us to God's love, he never promised that Spirit would make things cozy and easy. The Apostles, who were so filled with that same Spirit, did some pretty amazing things. But they also suffered greatly. Not many of them lived to a ripe-old age and died a peaceful death. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, was with them to empower them, to give them courage, to sustain them in their faith and connect them to God's love.

In *The Church: What We Are Meant to Be*, Ken Hutchinson says, “When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, it wasn’t dynamite, it was dynamo! Dynamite makes a loud noise, kicks up a lot of dust and it’s over. A dynamo is a continual source of power. It builds and builds and builds, and the power never stops flowing.” (Homiletics Magazine, May, 2007, p. 34)

On this day of Pentecost, when we remember the powerful way the Holy Spirit acted in the life of the early Church, we should be asking both to *receive* the Holy Spirit and to *perceive* the Spirit’s living presence. If, as Alan Jones suggests we are willing to be fools for Christ, we can pray to receive more of the Holy Spirit’s power and dynamism. And if you do, I can bet that God will act in many surprising ways in you and through you. We also need to *perceive* the ways that God’s Spirit is already present in us. We can *trust* that God has placed his very life in us, just as he will entrust that life to little Alivia, Daniel and Hanah. And we can look for those surprising situations, those places of risk and those things over which we have no control to begin to perceive the ways that God is present and active in our lives.

As we continue to receive and perceive the Holy Spirit alive and active, the amazing story of Pentecost will continue in us.