

I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT
(From the series: The Need for Creed)

Text: John 14:15-27

3/7/10

I

I heard a story this past week that got me thinking. See if it does the same for you. It's a story about living with a sense of wonder.

I had such an experience of wondering when I was a child of 4 or 5 and my Father showed me a compass. This needle behaved in such a determined way and did not fit into the usual explanation of how the world works, that is that you must touch something to move it. I still remember now...that this experience made a deep and lasting impression on me. There must be something deeply hidden behind everything.

The story is from the autobiographical notes of Albert Einstein. And of course we know what kind of life resulted from that wonder about what moved the needle.

Is there anything moving the needle in our lives, besides ourselves? Is there anything moving the needle in the church, besides our best efforts to increase attendance, build buildings, or raise cash?

The Apostle's Creed says that there is. There must be. The Creed calls it the Holy Spirit.

Apart from the force that moves the needle in our lives and in the church we might look like a compass, but we are really a pointless instrument. We do not know where we are going. And we have little ability to get there.

II

“I believe in the Holy Spirit.” But in what do I believe? To confess an invisible force as the third members of the Trinity is to allow a wondrous and sometimes unruly presence into our lives.

The words breath, Spirit, and wind are all translations of the same biblical word. That’s a clue and that’s a problem. The Spirit blows things around, and we tend to get nervous when the wind picks up.

The Spirit is God in motion, God the verb, God in the present tense. The Spirit is the God who moves. And while we can’t always see the mover, we often know when the Spirit has been around.

“When they were singing that song, I felt something run up and down my back.”
“When they made that call to commit your life to Christ, I felt myself pulled from my seat.” It may well have been the Spirit.

When we sit in the same old church, in the same old pew, around the same old people, and our heart is “strangely warmed” a divine person has come for a visit. The Spirit is taking control in order to make us obedient to Christ.

The Spirit is who makes our worship truly “worship”.

When the heavenly dove is not fluttering in the congregation everything is a drag: you have to beg for praise, cajole those present into meaningful involvement, and barricade the door to prevent an exit... Without the Spirit singing is merely noise; with the Spirit it is a joyful noise. Without the Spirit preaching is a boring talk; with the Spirit it is the life giving word.

When men and women are convicted that their comfort zone has become a straight jacket and they make the decision to peel it off in order to be obedient to Christ, you can be sure that the Spirit has come for a visit. When churches decide that taking risks is preferable to merely surviving, you can bet the Spirit is on move.

It is the Spirit’s nature to move. And when it does it moves us too.

III

So much for what the Spirit is. Let's talk some more about what it does. There is so much we can only scratch the surface today. Our text points us in two directions.

In John 14 Jesus is getting the disciples ready for his departure, and they don't like it. So in the sixteenth verse he assures them he will not leave them alone. He says:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth.

The Greek word is Paraclete which means something like equipper, advisor, or one who prepares you for a dispute. What's the challenge? What in dispute? We find it in verse 12:

I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

Jesus promise alone ought to blow us away and make us wonder. But he's saying the Spirit is the presence, direction, and power to do Jesus' mission in the world.

The Spirit moves the churches' needle and points *outward*. Apart from the Spirit we are the Westminster Presbyterian Museum. We are run by curators called clergy and funded by patrons called members. With the Spirit we are Christ in the world.

On our officers retreat in February we dealt with a pressing question. Is our church more a rowboat or a sailboat? What are we building? Rowboats are built to harness human effort and maintain control. Sailboats are constructed to harness the wind's power.

Rowboats are not very exciting but they are predictable. Apart from a major gale they go where you want them to, one sweaty pull at a time. Sailings different, it requires different skills, and takes you a bit out of control. It's easier to flip the boat! On the other hand you can head to some exciting places you never dreamed of being able to reach.

God's Spirit is wind that blows the church into the world; if we'll go.

The Spirit at the same time also moves the needle *inward*. In verse 26 Jesus also says:

But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

The Spirit brings to each of us the mind and way of Christ. The Spirit makes Jesus personal. He interprets what Jesus means so that from our hearts we can manifest what it means to be obedient to the way of Christ.

Apart from the Spirit you can read all the Bible you want, but it is a closed book. Apart from the Spirit a Christian Education may produce smarter people but it will not produce followers of Jesus. The old word for what the Spirit does in my life and in your life is “sanctification”. It teaches our bodies to obey the law of love that God has implanted in our hearts and in our minds.

The Spirit moves the needle! It points us outward toward the world and inward in the direction of our hearts.

IV

So what are we going to do with the Holy Spirit? At least two things people like us usually don't like to do. We must ask for it. And we must wait for it.

Jesus makes it very clear; the Spirit is a gift! And gifts must be wanted, waited for, and received when they arrive. A church, and a person, who believes in the Holy Spirit has to be willing to dependant on the giver.

The Spirit, as God, is everywhere. And yet it must be invoked and asked for on a daily basis. Not because it isn't here, but because we have to become dependant on it.

We wait best when we spend as much time praying, listening, and discerning as we do talking, scheming and planning. And that fights against our natural desire to be in control of what God does in the church and in our lives. To believe in the Holy Spirit is to believe that faithfulness is learning to catch the wind; not build a bigger fan.

I couldn't help but notice that this past year the Presbyterian Church USA slipped from being the eighth largest denomination in the country to the ninth. We lost just over 3% our members. What was more interesting was who grew from the ninth largest denomination to become the eighth. It was the Assemblies of God, the Pentecostal people who at times seem to speak about the Spirit and little else.

It's a worldwide growth as well. No branch of Protestant Christianity is growing faster, in more difficult places, than the Pentecostals.

Is that because they are all right, and we are all wrong? Not at all. They've made some spectacular mistakes. But I think they have remembered something we have tended to forget. If God comes to the world as a sacred breeze, his people need to spend a lot more time learning how to sail, and a lot less learning how to row.

V

If you own a compass, when you get home I'd encourage you to pull it out and take a look. If you don't maybe you should buy one and set it where you can see it.

It's a fine thing to own a compass. If you're a Christian the really important thing is to know who moves the needle.