

## **Openness to the Holy Spirit**

May 26, 2013

John 16:12-15

Purpose: To challenge the congregation to recognize and become more receptive to the role and work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Our text this morning is part of a passage known as Jesus' farewell address. Here in the Gospel of John we find Jesus with his disciples gathered together just prior to the Passover Festival. Just before his farewell address is the account of how Jesus stood up from the table, wrapped a towel around his waist, and began to wash the disciples' feet. After predicting his betrayal and Peter's denial, Jesus begins his farewell address. Even if his disciples did not understand, Jesus understood that the time was coming when he would leave them, and so he offers what has become known as his farewell address. As Jesus anticipates his upcoming suffering and death, what are the words he leaves with his followers? What is the essence of his final teaching? What words of hope and promise does he offer? In the midst of challenging his disciples to remain faithful, Jesus offers encouragement, comfort, and hope by speaking of the promise of God's gift that will be coming, the Holy Spirit.

Last week we celebrated Pentecost—the arrival of this promised gift, the in-breaking of the Spirit. In his sermon Pastor Neil named the temptation to assume that Pentecost was only a single event that happened thousands of years ago. The outcome of that assumption is that we can struggle to notice or expect to see the ways that Pentecost continues to happen today in 2013. While Pentecost marks the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit, the birth of the church, it does not, as Neil said mean that the transforming, powerful work of the Spirit is not an ongoing reality in our lives.

In Jesus' farewell address he describes in greater detail the gift of the Holy Spirit, specifically the roles and characteristics the Holy Spirit will possess when it comes. This morning I want to briefly highlight five characteristics of the Holy Spirit described in this farewell address. Then I want to share several ways of what I believe are some of the most common ways we silence or quench the Holy Spirit, followed by several ways we might work to amplify or increase our receptivity to the Holy Spirit.

As we get started, I think we should offer a couple of disclaimers or at least state some perceived realities. First, I think that some of us get a little uncomfortable when we start talking about the Holy Spirit. We are more at ease talking about Jesus and God, the other members of the Trinity. But when we turn to talking about the Holy Spirit, our anxiety radars begin to rise. This occurs in part simply because, within our Anabaptist faith tradition, we focus so much on Jesus within the Trinity that we have simply not have had as much exposure to conversations about the Holy Spirit. Secondly, I think our anxieties rise out of fear of how other faith traditions handle conversations and practices related to the Holy Spirit and its work among us. Also, as we begin, we need to recognize and name the large element of mystery that is present as we talk about and embrace the Holy Spirit.

With those disclaimers out of the way, let us turn to the text to learn once again how Jesus describes the roles and characteristics of the gift of the Holy Spirit. The first characteristic is

perhaps the one that the others all build upon. In John 14:16-17, Jesus shares that the Holy Spirit will be with us forever as the Holy Spirit lives with us and will be in us. Jesus describes to his disciples that, unlike the world, they will know the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit lives within them.

As described in the Gospel of John, the Holy Spirit is present with and within us with the central role of being the Spirit of Truth. In fact, John uses the designation of Spirit of Truth most frequently to describe the Holy Spirit. In a world of falsehoods and deception, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit, who is with us always, comes as the Spirit of Truth. Throughout the farewell discourse Jesus builds upon this second characteristic, the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Truth. In 16:13 we read, “But when the Spirit of Truth comes he will guide you into all the truth.” Not only is the Holy Spirit the Spirit of Truth but it will serve as our guide into truth.

The third characteristic of the Holy Spirit is that the Holy Spirit will help and comfort us. In 14:16 Jesus says that God will “give you another advocate to help you.” The Greek word translated as advocate in the Today’s New International Version is really a complex word with several different meanings. *Advocate* is probably the most frequent translation of this Greek word and yet, as biblical scholar Willard Swartley points out, the word also possesses a sense of “comforter and guide, helper, and even teacher.”<sup>1</sup>

The final two characteristics continue to build upon the characteristic of Spirit of Truth. These characteristics are, first, that the Holy Spirit will teach us, reminding us of what Jesus said as it testifies about Jesus; and second, that the Holy Spirit will convict the world of sin. I believe that these two characteristics are linked together and yet are distinct. First, in 14:26 Jesus says, “The Advocate [again the same Greek word with several translation possibilities], 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.” Then in 15:26 Jesus says, “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me.” It is as if Jesus is saying that the Holy Spirit will continue to preach the same message, teach the same lessons, and demonstrate the same attitude as was revealed in Jesus. Or it is as if Jesus is saying even if we want to try to forget or overlook what he taught us, the Holy Spirit will remind us of what he said, who he was, what he did.

I believe that sometimes, as the Holy Spirit reminds us of what Jesus said and testifies about Jesus, we will feel convicted with the understanding of convicted as a transitive verb meaning “to show that somebody is in the wrong in some respect.”<sup>2</sup> In 16:8 Jesus says, “When the Advocate comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment.” Again as the Holy Spirit comes as the Spirit of Truth, it will illuminate a world that accepts darkness, lies, and deceit as normative.

So Jesus tells us in his farewell address that this amazing gift of God, this gift of the Holy Spirit, is one who is with us and in us all the time, one who functions as the Spirit of Truth as the Holy Spirit comforts us, convicts us, and teaches us. In and through it all we are invited to be open to the Holy Spirit’s presence and work in our lives, to be receptive to its activity and calling.

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<sup>1</sup> Believers Church, John, 387.

<sup>2</sup> Encarta Dictionary from Word

However, sometimes we do not heed the warning from the Apostle Paul where in 1 Thessalonians 5:19 he instructs, “Do not quench the Spirit.”

As I sat with this passage this week I came up with three of what I think are some of the most common ways we quench or silence the Holy Spirit in our lives. Perhaps you will be able to add additional ways. The first way I believe we quench the Holy Spirit is when we look to everything and everyone else besides the Holy Spirit for guidance, wisdom, comfort, discernment, and truth.

Imagine with me that you are facing a major or minor decision in your life or you are experiencing a difficulty. Perhaps you are considering a job change or being forced to consider a job change or considering retiring. Or you are pursuing a relationship and trying to discern the next steps. Or you have received a medical diagnosis and need to discern the course of treatment. Or you are deciding if it is time to upgrade the family car, or take that vacation, or expand your family, or buy a house. Or you are trying to decide which college to attend, or discern your vocational calling. Or you are trying to parent your newborn baby, your middle school student, your young adult child. Or you are just trying to decide what to say next in a conversation with a neighbor. When we find ourselves in any of those situations, where is the first place we turn to for counsel or wisdom? If we are facing a major decision, or even a minor one, or a significant difficulty, where do we go to for wisdom? Where do we turn as we seek discernment? Which voice do we trust to speak truth into our souls?

The popular culture around us is quick to tell us where we should turn for advice, counsel, and wisdom. Usually it just involves turning on your computer or your TV and tuning into the popular culture wisdom of people like Dr. Phil, Katie Couric, Dr. Oz, or another talk show host. Or you go to the local bookstore, or better yet, download an e-book from Amazon, with the latest information on how to solve this problem or the best advice for this particular situation.

Several years ago Casting Crowns, a Christian music group, came out with song entitled “What if his people prayed.” In this song are the provocative lines, “What if the life that we pursue came from a hunger for the truth? What if the family turned to Jesus instead of asking Oprah what to do?” I believe that we silence the Holy Spirit when we intentionally seek counsel and wisdom from everyone else instead of seeking out the discernment of the Spirit that lives within.

The second common way I believe we silence the Holy Spirit is when we ignore its voice when the Holy Spirit is convicting us of sin. You know, those times we sense the Holy Spirit nudging us and working within us to lead us into the ways of truth and righteousness, and instead of heeding the Spirit’s voice, we silence the Spirit, ignore the convictions, scream above the gentle whisper of the Spirit, and proceed to do what we want when we want it. We indulge our own desires even in the face of the Holy Spirit prompting us to obey, to turn away, to seek wholeness.

Finally, I offer that a third common way we quench the Holy Spirit is when we sense the Spirit prompting us, inviting us, propelling us to join it in testifying of Jesus Christ and instead we remain silent. We rationalize, sometimes it feels like with a million reasons, why it would be better just to be quiet, not to stir up the waters, to refrain from using our voices or our lives to testify to the risen Savior. In effect, we say to the Holy Spirit, “Thanks, but no thanks. I think this time I will just be silent. I will not speak up and speak out against racism, sexism, violence,

abuse, injustice. I will not use my voice right now to proclaim hope, joy, salvation, and peace. I will quench the Spirit. I will silence its voice within.”

This morning, the Sunday after Pentecost, I believe we are being called and prompted by the Holy Spirit to work at ways of amplifying the voice of the Holy Spirit in our lives. First we must name and acknowledge the ways we quench or silence the Spirit, for it is only after we have named our coping strategies that we will be able to work at amplifying the whisper of the Spirit.

The first way I believe we can turn up the volume of the Holy Spirit is to create time to be still and to listen to the Spirit. One way to do that is to engage in spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible study, silence and solitude, or even aspects of service. I believe that, the more we open ourselves to the Spirit’s work and foster our relationship with the Holy Spirit, the more we will be able to recognize and embrace the presence and work of the Spirit in our lives. However, to do that we must slow down and silence other voices—our own and those around us.

Our culture preaches to us that we must turn outside of ourselves to the experts when we face a decision or a difficulty. I would modify that to say that the second way we can work to better hear the voice of the Spirit is to surround ourselves with others who will ask engaging, thoughtful, Spirit-led questions to better enable us to see the Spirit’s work in our lives. I am most familiar with a process like a Quaker clearness committee or group spiritual direction. The profound difference from the theology of the world’s counsel is that this type of group surrounding you is not there to offer you expert advice or to tell you what you should do. Instead the group surrounding you is committed to listening to the Spirit in their own lives, and then, after listening to you, to ask engaging questions that might help prompt you to acknowledge what the Spirit is up to in your life.

The third way I believe we can work to amplify the voice of the Holy Spirit is to start obeying it when it convicts us of sin or prompts us to join it in testifying about Jesus. I believe that it is time that we scrape off the calluses of our hearts and souls and again become acutely aware and sensitive to those whispers and nudges of the Holy Spirit. I believe that, when we find ourselves without the layers of calluses we have allowed to form, we will be able to hear the Spirit of Truth leading us into truth and away from lies, deceitfulness, mockery, and death. And without those layers of calluses I believe that we will more easily be able to push aside our hesitations, fears, and embarrassments and readily embrace the opportunity to testify alongside the Spirit as described in our text today.

In just a moment I will invite us all, of all ages, to consider being anointed with oil as a symbol ritual to remind us of our openness and receptiveness to the Holy Spirit in our lives. Throughout the Old and New Testaments we read various accounts of individuals who were anointed with oil in a variety of contexts. We read of individuals anointed with oil as they were consecrated as leaders; or as a sign that they were set apart for specific ministries; or as an act of cleansing, or of healing, or of empowerment; or as a symbol of being open to the Holy Spirit.

We will first have several moments of silence when we are invited to look inward. I challenge us to consider the ways we have formed calluses or the ways we quench or silence the Spirit. And

then as we sit and listen, may we be challenged to hear how the Spirit is inviting us, challenging us, beckoning us, to magnify, amplify its voice in our lives.

After these moments of silence, JD will lead us in singing, and as he does so Neil, Lyle, and I will be available in the front for those who wish to be anointed as a physical symbol of our openness to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Those who wish to be anointed may choose to be anointed on their forehead or hand. As we anoint you we will say, "As a sign of your openness to the work of the Holy Spirit in your life, we anoint you with oil in the name of God your Creator, Jesus your Savior, and the Holy Spirit the Spirit of Truth who lives within you."

If you wish to be anointed but are physically unable to come forward, please signal for one of our ushers and they will make one of the pastors aware and we will come to your seat to anoint you.

During this time may God pour out God's blessings on us, the Holy Spirit empower and convict us, and through it all Jesus' name be glorified. Amen.

Benediction: from 2 Corinthians 13:13

As we go, may "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all."