

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: June 3, 2018
Sermon Title: What Spirit?
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Scripture Litany

Scripture Litany

- Together:** When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them." (Acts 2:1-3)
- Leader:** "You are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit if the Spirit of God lives in you." (Romans 8:9)
- People:** "God has sent the Spirit of Jesus into our hearts." (Galatians 4:6) "The Spirit testifies that we are God's children." (Romans 8:16)
- Leader:** "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple, and that God's Spirit lives in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16)
- People:** "God will send another Counselor to be with you forever -- the Spirit of Truth . . . who will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said." (John 14:16-17, 26)
- Together:** "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God." (Ephesians 4:30) "Do not put out the Spirit's fire." (1 Thessalonians 5:19)
- Leader:** "The Spirit has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for captives and release from darkness for the prisoners." (Isaiah 61:1)

A few weeks ago we used that same Scripture Litany to celebrate Pentecost, the sort of official birthday of Christianity. Pentecost is a Jewish festival and now a Christian one that comes 50 days after Easter. That was when the Holy Spirit swept through the Disciples and empowered them, moved them, motivated them to such a degree that 3,000 people joined them, 3,000 people got baptized that very day and decided to believe in Jesus.

No longer a motley crew of uneducated, rural disciples, they were now a full-blown movement, quickly developing a structure, a purpose, a theology and . . . well, the Church. That was also the introduction of the Holy Spirit into the life of the Church, into the thinking of Christianity, into the lives of Christians.

But what the heck *is* the Holy Spirit? Before that, we had God and Jesus, both clear enough. The God of Judaism was unseen, sure enough. But over a 3,000-year relationship, God was firmly entrenched in the minds and hearts of Jewish people. They knew that God is just, God is active, God demands certain rights, R-I-T-E-S, and rights, R-I-G-H-T-S as opposed to wrongs. Do this. Don't do that. And do this correctly and regularly. Because God may be unseen, but God is definitely around and interested and ready to pounce.

So, the God part people got. And Jesus is pretty straightforward. He walked this earth for 33 years, flesh and bone, an identifiable, recognizable, tangible presence, in the biggest sense of the word: *presence*. We talk about certain people having a "commanding presence." Just by being there . . . Jesus had it.

People used to say about Jesus, "He had an authority," even with no obvious basis for that authority. But Jesus could walk into a room, walk into a village, walk into a house, walk into the Temple, or just walk around the countryside, and people took notice, people listened, people wanted what he had: *presence*.

Plus, he said things and did things that were memorable. The Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes. Parables. Walking on water. Raising Lazarus. Healing lepers. Believe it or don't believe it, people are still grappling with the physical reality of the literal Jesus. Fair enough, God is a fairly well established idea all over the world. And Jesus is a fairly well accepted and respected person all over the world. You fill up Yankee Stadium with a random 50,000 people. Ask them how many people believe in God. A lot of hands would go up. And then ask how many people like Jesus. Most hands would go up.

We were in Yankee Stadium on Memorial Day with three of our kids and our nephew. My nephew is a mountain of a man, powerful, tall, shaved head, and dressed in black and tattooed in a major way. Kind of intimidating. About the fourth inning, the guy behind us leans over, takes my nephew's arm and says, "So, you're a Christian," just like that. My nephew has a long verse from the Bible tattooed over probably 12 inches on the inside and outside parts of his arm, and the guy behind him had been reading it whenever he could catch a

peek. Then he saw the 8-inch Cross tattoo, at which point he showed us his arm with his Bible passage, Jesus-centered tattoos. Later, while standing in the concession line, a stranger said to me, "That was very cool, watching those guys explain their tattoos. I like that." So, yes, I think Jesus would pass muster at Yankee Stadium.

But what about the Holy Spirit? If it was just some other impenetrable doctrine, that we could take it or leave it, O.K. Transubstantiation. Predestination. Virgin birth. Apocalyptic. But the Holy Spirit? Well, that's not really a take-it-or-leave it. First of all, Jesus talks about it a lot, as though it's important. Second, the Holy Spirit makes the Trinity, Trinity meaning three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or as some say, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit; or, as others say, the First Person of the Trinity, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Third Person of the Trinity. Third, the Holy Spirit is one of those tests that some Christians throw at other Christians to decide if they're really Christian.

People will ask, "Do you go to a 'Bible-believing' Church?" Or, "Is your Church a 'born-again' Church?" Or, "Are you a 'spirit-filled' Church?" If you get a blank stare, you've flunked! Let me help you not to flunk.

Everyone in this room has "left" for something. Left for vacation. Left on a business trip. Left one town for another. Left for college. And you did your best to prepare for leaving. Packing, planning, shopping, you know the drill. Well, Jesus knew he was leaving. Jesus knew his time was short; his life, his earthly experience was soon to end. And if his work was to go on, if his purpose was to succeed, if his closest friends were to have any confidence going forward, they all needed to be prepared for his leaving. So Jesus started talking about the Holy Spirit.

I don't know what you think of Sean Hannity (there, I've got your attention now!), but for years he began his radio show with (and still says regularly), "Let not your heart be troubled . . ." Well, Hannity borrowed that from Jesus. Jesus introduced the Holy Spirit to his Disciples by saying, "Let not your heart be troubled . . ." Yes I'm leaving. I'm going away, and you're not coming with me, yet. But don't worry, I've got you covered: "I will not leave you comfortless," is what Jesus says. Some Bibles translate it as "not leave you orphans/friendless/desolate/alone." The point being, you're not in this alone. Anything. Whatever it is.

While Jesus was with his Disciples, literally, physically *with* the disciples, they faced stuff, but never comfortless, alone. They faced opposition, scarce resources, confusion, storms, but never by themselves. Jesus was always there—that "presence" thing.

But now, Jesus was announcing that he's leaving, far enough away that they can't follow . . . *But*, Jesus says, I'm not leaving you without support. I'm leaving you with the Holy Spirit.

I don't want to make this more complicated than necessary. Yes, the Trinity is hard to grasp. Yes, some of the more spectacular "gifts of the Spirit" like "speaking in tongues," or "prophecy" can be confusing. But stick to the root of it: Jesus promises that God's Spirit is with us. We are not alone (thank you very much, E.T.!). We are not alone.

Some aspect of Jesus, some part of Jesus, well, some, let's say it, some power of Jesus is still there. Then the Bible goes on to list some of the benefits of the Holy Spirit, the attributes, the way it works in our lives. The Holy Spirit is called the "Counselor," "Advocate," "Guide," "The Breath of God," "The Truth," "Teacher," "Intercessor," and one of my favorites, the "Rememberer," the reminder. All ways of saying whatever you're facing, you're not in it alone. The Holy Spirit isn't Jesus's physicality, and not God's laws and majesty. This is subtler, intensely personal, timely.

There are times in life when we feel stymied, lost, don't know what to say, can't figure something out, afraid, afraid to choose, afraid to speak up, or just plain wiped out, emotionally, spiritually; you're at your end. That's when, Jesus says, the Holy Spirit steps in, clears your head, gives you voice, puts steel in your spine. *INSPIRES* you. See that word, "inspire"? It means, literally, to "put the Spirit in you."

Thursday night we hosted a fascinating young man, Abbas Hameed. A handsome young man, he's probably 40, but he looks 15. He's been through hell in life! Born in Iraq to a Catholic dad and a Muslim mom, that mixed birth exposed him to oppression early on. His dad was imprisoned and tortured under Saddam Hussein and later executed by Islamic terrorists. But Abbas, by law, became an Iraqi police officer at age 18, right at the start our war against Iraq, a war he welcomed in hope of freedom.

Abbas began working with the U.S. military as a translator, becoming part of a SWAT team, Intelligence, Special Ops, consistently proving himself valuable. Abbas and our soldiers shared the same daily horrors of roadside bombings, terrorists, firefights, car bombs, death, destruction on a daily basis. Time and time again his young life was spared as if by some design, some divine, guiding hand, plunging him into a spiritual whirlwind.

He wanted to know why was he still alive? Why was he spared? What did God want from him? Indeed, what, or who, is God? His father's brutal imprisonment had led to whole-life transformation and a revived Christian faith before being murdered. Abbas saw a spark of Christ in some American soldiers. He saw the almost magical reverence soldiers had for the Bible. He wanted to know more.

He wanted to know God. As he continued his service to our military, he took a hard right turn into Christianity and has let that turn become the guiding light for his life.

During the question-and-answer period, he ended going right where this sermon is going. Despite all the horror and evil he has seen, despite being on a terrorist hit list, despite the wrongs of his own life which shame him, he lives without fear, without hatred, without revenge; he lives a life of forgiveness, even toward the terrorists, a life of love here in America, a life of faith through his own ministry. How does he do it? How is he not angry, not bitter, not broken?

Well, he repeatedly called it the "power of Jesus." The "power of Jesus" in him helps him to love his enemies. But what is this "power of Jesus"? I mean, Jesus isn't here, he left, he said so himself!

Well, that's the Holy Spirit. That's the power of God and the "presence" of Jesus experienced in a new way. It's God at work, even if we don't see God. It's Jesus at work, even if he has left the building. What stays on is God's Spirit, what we call the Holy Spirit, the Holy Ghost. This essence of God in Christ, unseen but fully experienced.

In one of the short stories from my not-so-new book, I tell a true story from my childhood. We lived way up in rural Maine across from a farm. One day a man came home to the farm, couldn't find his father, looked all over, finally found him underneath the tractor. Going up a little hill, the tractor had flipped over on top of the old man. The son lifted up the tractor, tossed it aside, and saved his father's life. The next day the son went back to right the tractor, but he couldn't budge it. So . . . what is that? Under "normal" circumstances, the son couldn't budge the tractor. But the day before wasn't "normal circumstances." Nowadays we might call that "adrenaline." Up there, in that little town of Monson, Maine, there was no doubt. God gave that son power for that day, that moment, that tractor. Jesus couldn't be there. He's left. But he left behind just what is needed. And maybe, in terms of human physiology, the Holy Spirit worked as an adrenaline rush."

At the end it doesn't really matter what you call it. Miracle or adrenaline, the tractor got tossed aside. Call it God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit; it's all semantics, theological wordplay that has depth to it, but not in our daily life. In our daily life, you and I, we just don't want to be "comfortless." We don't want to feel isolated, abandoned, forlorn. Whether in war or sports or daily life, we are willing to give it our all if we feel there is someone beside us.

And that's is Jesus's promise to each of us.

Let's stand and sing our final hymn, "Spirit of the Living God," No. 259 in your Hymnal:

*Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me,
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us.
Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us,
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us.*