

*A Holy Spirit Primer*

Are you afraid of ghosts? You don't have to be afraid of the Holy Ghost. However, the name "Holy Ghost" is considered archaic now. At one time the term ghost referred to the immaterial part of a person, kind of a synonym for soul. The English language evolved and changed over time, and ghost came to mean a disembodied spirit, usually a malevolent spirit, Casper the Friendly Ghost notwithstanding. So, while there is absolutely nothing wrong with referring to the Third Person of the Holy Trinity as the Holy Ghost, usually today we use the name Holy Spirit. Of course, poets and hymn writers liked the name Holy Ghost because a host of words rhyme with ghost, for instance host and most, but I can't think of any English words that rhyme with spirit exactly. The current English translation of Martine Luther's *A Mighty Fortress* stretches a bit to make "fear it" rhyme with "Spirit," but my junior high school English teacher would have never stood for that.

Regardless, many Christians, especially Lutherans Christians, seem as if they are afraid of the Holy Spirit. On the whole, we do not talk about the Holy Spirit much. Rarely is the Holy Spirit the topic of a Sunday School lesson or sermon. We tend to get nervous when other Christians display their spiritual gifts. Ignorance breeds fear and many Lutherans simply do not know enough about the Holy Spirit to be comfortable with the Spirit -- and that is not spiritually healthy. We need not fear the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is our friend and Helper. So on this Pentecost Sunday, we will spend a little time thinking together about the Holy Spirit and how He is active in the church and in our lives.

Each week we confess belief in the Holy Spirit. We could, conceivably, just confess belief in the Spirit, but the creeds and the Holy Scriptures use the adjective Holy to describe the noun Spirit. Why are they so specific about the Spirit being Holy? One reason is that not all spirits are holy. In the creeds we confess that God is the Creator of all things, both seen and unseen. There is an unseen spiritual reality all around us. Often today people will tell

us that they are “spiritual” but not “religious.” We can sympathize with their disdain for so-called organized religion with all its problems. But not everything that is spiritual is necessarily holy or even good.

There are malevolent spirits and bad spirituality. Some people pass off the biblical witness to the existence of demons and other evil spirits as being merely the misunderstandings of pre-scientific people. We would counter that all the evil in our world is more than enough evidence that there are spiritual forces at work in our world that are opposed to God’s reign, and that is what scripture tells us. The iniquity in our world is due to more than a simple lack of goodness or knowledge. If there is no spiritual force of evil, just what was it that Jesus defeated by his cross if not the spiritual powers of sin, death, and the devil?

So the Holy Spirit is called Holy to set Him apart from other spirits. But what is a spirit? Earlier I described our spirits as the immaterial portion of our being. We have bodies, but we are more than just a bag of bio-chemicals walking around. There is something about us that transcends our physical functions and limitations. Our minds are more than just our brains. What other animal possesses self-consciousness and can contemplate its self and its relationship to its Creator except human beings? It is our spirit that makes us unique. We can use this analogy to describe it: By itself, a glove is lifeless. But put a hand in that glove, and it can move and pick up things and make gestures. In a similar way, our body is a like a lifeless glove, but filled with our spirit, our bodies become animated and useful.

The Holy Spirit is God’s Spirit active on earth. It is the Holy Spirit that gives life to the church as the whole people of God and to the individual Christian. Christ promised his followers that he would not abandon them; he would not leave them alone after he ascended into heaven. To fulfill that promise, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to be our companion, Helper, and guide. The Holy Spirit fills us and continues Christ’s ministry on earth by working through people like us. Jesus said that it was to our advantage that he

went away and sent the Spirit to us. He also said that we, his followers, would do even greater works than he did in his name. What Jesus said is true because through the Holy Spirit the Christian gospel has spread through the entire world, it has been limited to just Israel in the first century, and Christians believers have been the most powerful force for good in the world throughout history. These things could never have been accomplished just by us on our own; it is the only Holy Spirit who has made great such things possible.

While we certainly give all the credit and glory to God the Holy Spirit, we must also acknowledge that we are called by God to cooperate with the Holy Spirit. I am not saying that we cooperate with the Holy Spirit to achieve our salvation. That would not be biblical or confessionally Lutheran. Salvation is a pure gift of God by grace alone received in faith alone. But, when it comes to living our lives in this world, when it comes to making choices about ethics and stewardship and service, God respects our free will. The Holy Spirit never forces Himself on us. He never makes us do anything against our will. Just like when someone says “The devil made me do it,” we know they had a choice, so in a similar way do we have a choice in following the Holy Spirit where He leads or not. The Holy Spirit offers us gifts, but we are free to accept or reject them.

That whole idea of spiritual gifts becomes a hang up for many of us. People are frequently skeptical, and rightfully so, about some of things we see on TV that claim to be Holy Spirit related. Maybe some of us have had bad experiences with so-called charismatic churches. No doubt in the early church speaking in tongues was the most notable gift given by the Holy Spirit. Some people say that the gift of tongues was for that time and place only, and it has no place in the church today. Others say that it does. I’m not going to get involved in that argument other than to say that while the Bible recognizes the gift of tongues, it also says that there is a greater spiritual gift. That is the gift of love. The Bible calls love the most excellent gift.

We may not all speak in tongues. I never have. We may not all have all the other gifts of the Holy Spirit: the ability to preach or teach or administer or whatever. We may not all excel in patience or kindness or whatever. But we can all love our neighbors. And by love we don't mean that you have to have a warm, fuzzy feeling inside for everyone. We show love by treating one another with kindness and justice and compassion. We can all do that. Actually, the Holy Spirit is urging all of us to do just that, and we know it is true because the Holy Spirit is in each one of us.

The Holy Spirit comes to us in Holy Baptism. Holy Baptism is baptism into Christ. In Christian Baptism ordinary water is combined with the extraordinary Word of God and we become members of the church, which is the Body of Christ. Christ, who is the head of the body, fills his members, his body parts, that is us, with his Holy Spirit so that we might do his will. No doubt, the Holy Spirit may be active in our lives before and after Baptism. No doubt, some people renounce their faith and reject the benefit of their Baptism. But in Baptism the Holy Spirit is implanted in us. We do not have to worry about whether or not we are spiritual. We do not have worry about whether or not we have access to the Holy Spirit. By virtue of what Christ has done for us, we do.

What the Holy Spirit always does is reveal Christ to us. The testimony of Christ is preserved in his Holy Word, the Bible. Jesus said the Holy Spirit will take what is his and declare it to us, and he said that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth. The Holy Spirit doesn't make up anything new, rather the Holy Spirit teaches us God's will from God's Word. Through the power of the Word, the Holy Spirit forms the mind of Christ in us. The Holy Spirit sanctifies us, that is He makes us holy and Christ-like. The Spirit that spoke through the prophets in the Old Testament is speaking to you and me. Nothing could be more natural for a Christian.

Life in the Holy Spirit is not some strange, mystical, psychedelic, esoteric experience. Life in the Holy Spirit is as simple as reading and hearing God's Word, living out your faith among God's people, and remembering your Baptism. We do not have to be afraid of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is our friend and Helper. Let us be open to His guidance on this Pentecost Sunday and always. Amen.