

Acts 17:22-31; Psalm 66:8-20; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

Last week we heard my friend Tyler Merrill preach an eloquent message on the irrational nature of Christianity. He stated that as Christians we ought to strive to live lives that do not make sense. Derived from last week's lectionary, he stated that this nonsensical faith requires us to love our enemies. However, in order to do so, we first need to be vulnerable in order for reconciliation to become a possibility. This however, is monumentally easier said than done. But, he suggested, when we are filled with the Holy Spirit, these nonsensical unrealistic commands cease to be so. My questions then, echoing questions in the Church, during the past two millennia are: how do we become filled with the Holy Spirit, how do we know when we are filled with the Holy Spirit, and what do our lives look like when filled with the Holy Spirit?

In today's readings, the Biblical authors attempt to interact with these two-millennia-old questions. The history of the Church has perpetually attempted to comprehend the power and mystery within the Holy Spirit. When we turn to Holy Scripture we can identify three specific models of the Holy Spirit. The three models are: Spirit as wind, Spirit as breath, and Spirit as charism. Consequently, the early Church, exemplified by our Easter reading of the Book of Acts, was forced to distinguish whether or not the Spirit was divine. If so, who then does the Holy Spirit proceed from—God the Father or both Father and Son? These questions are especially peculiar when we realize that when today's texts were written the Church had yet to define the Holy Spirit as we now know it. Yet, today's scripture readings, especially the gospel reading identify how it is imperative to the Christian faith. Consequently, it ought to be attended to and grappled with.

The Early Church's grappling with the Holy Spirit can be observed by juxtaposing the Church's statement on the Holy Spirit at the Council of Nicea and Constantinople. In 325 CE at the Council of Nicea, the Church plainly asserts that the Church *believes* in the Holy Spirit, whereas at the Council at Constantinople in 381 CE professes the Church's belief in the Holy Spirit, but it also identified its divinity, its procession from the Father, and how it is worshipped and glorified. The mere fifty-four years between these two councils demonstrate not only the mystery that is the Holy Spirit, but also the Church's grappling with its identity. Nonetheless, we are still asking 'what is the Holy Spirit and 'how do I live in it'?

Similar to the early Church, we, in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have seen the Church grapple with identifying, observing, and discerning the role of the Holy Spirit. Needless to say, the Charismatic Movement is not unique for its emphasis on the Holy Spirit in worship and Christian life. Rather, the Charismatic movement is indicative of how pneumatology or the study of the Spirit has been imperative to the very Being of the Christian Church. Thus, it significant that we take time to identify, wrestle with and worship the Holy Spirit. In an age where one could argue that Scripture has replaced the Holy Spirit in the Trinity, we ought to take time to acknowledge it, embrace it and, allow it to shape our lives. However, we cannot appreciate it without first acknowledging its role within the Body of Christ.

As the gospel reading alludes to today, the power of Jesus' life could not be contained in this world. His joy sent the personal being known as the Holy Spirit. In the sixteen hundred years since the two previously discussed councils, the Church has discerned through Christ that the Holy Spirit is divine, proceeds from the Father and Son, and continually reveals to humanity the way and life of Christ. As a result, we can comprehend the Holy Spirit as a "personal being rather than an impersonal force, power, or activity."<sup>1</sup> According to Martin Bucer in his 1536 commentary on the gospels, prior to the sending of the Holy Spirit, we were incapable of apprehending anything pertaining to God. Due to our unholy state, we were unable of obtaining God's wisdom or righteousness. Only through the Holy Spirit can we obtain such holy things. Consequently, the task of the Holy Spirit is twofold. First, the Holy Spirit reveals God's truth to humanity. In doing so, the Spirit leads humanity to God through the process of sanctification. Sanctification, the second task of the Holy Spirit, is a process that takes place within an individual and within a community. As a result of sanctification, the Spirit revolutionizes the order of life within Christianity. It unites, reconciles, enlivens, speaks, and builds up the Body of Christ in love.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, the Holy Spirit aligns humanity back into unison with God. This is to say that the Holy Spirit is imperative to the Christian life because it calls humanity to order. This order is dependent upon the Triune God's wisdom and perpetually calls us to habitually practice living in it. At times it is difficult to recognize order in the life of 21<sup>st</sup> century, task-crazed Christian. However, I would like to suggest that in like manner to how the stars can become more prominent when we turn of man-made light, so too would the order of God's wisdom through the presence of the Holy Spirit—if only we as a Church choose to be more attentive to it. Being attentive to the ever-present Holy Spirit is how become filled with it.

Specifically for myself, the order of my theological education has aided in understanding and has come alongside each function of the Holy Spirit. Thanks to this community of Christ-followers I am learning to assume and be attentive to the lenses, which comprehend the power and mystery of the Holy Spirit. God's truth was revealed to me in Rick McPeak's COR 102 class. God's grace and salvation became a reality to me through the powerful process of sanctification on Greenville's campus. Finally, my life has become energized for God through the habitual reading, writing, and contemplation of God within the Greenville community. Thus, in like manner to those throughout the Christian Church, we can see that one can more fully grasp the Holy Spirit and its significant role in faith inside a communal model. Therefore, it is only through this communal context that we can fully know God's truth, strengthen our relationship with Christ, and become a more perfect self in Christ.

Thus, as we re-examine the texts today it is apparent that we are called to partake and be attentive to God's wisdom. It is this, God's wisdom that continually calls us back into relationship with Him. In his work *Learning to Dream Again*, Samuel Wells states that God's wisdom is demonstrated within Christianity through three themes. These three themes are: earthly humility, shameful suffering, and effervescent joy. Furthermore, Wells states that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is juxtaposed with His

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<sup>1</sup> McGrath, Alister. *Theology, The Basics*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 117.

<sup>2</sup> Green, Michael. *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*. Cambridge: Kingsway, 2004.

wisdom through this—His earthly humility, shameful suffering on the cross, and the effervescent joy of his resurrection. In today's readings we see each of these three themes demonstrated.

From the book of Psalms we see the author coming to God praising His name on high. The author has experienced the low reality of being humbled on earth. Rather than turning to and acting on his own desires, the author praises God in the midst of his own trials. By attending to God, the author is capable of acknowledging God's steadfast love. In the reading from 1 Peter the author of this epistle charges his audience with the predicament of suffering in this life. Rather than attempting to justify the presence of suffering in one's life as divine reparation, the author makes reference to Christ's shameful suffering on the cross as what allows us the opportunity to be back into unison with God. Finally, in the gospel of John we see the effervescent joy that is made available when we are attentive to the Holy Spirit. It is this effervescent joy that accompanied Christ in the resurrection and it is the same joy that will welcome us in heaven. At the root of this joy is love. As Tyler stated last week and the gospel of John states today, by loving we, 'will be loved by the Father, loved by Jesus Christ, and will have Christ revealed to us.' However, this living in unison to the Holy Spirit is more easily said than done. Or is it?

In preparation to this sermon, as you may already tell, I was continually drawn back to the notion of being attentive to the always present Holy Spirit. It drives us, beckons us, and re-aligns us into a personal relationship with God. However, it is easy to get bogged down in theological terminology. For this reason, I found myself periodically returning to the three Biblical models of the Holy Spirit: wind, breath, and charism. Specifically, I was drawn to the imagery of wind and breath. It was a literal breath of fresh air to me while composing this sermon. As a result of choosing to write a majority of this message outside, each chicken-skin-provoking gust of wind also provoked me to dwell on God's love. The wind moves; it provokes; it beckons. I soon remembered that I am in a seldomly acknowledged relationship with it. Serendipitously, the study of the Holy Spirit or pneumatology is derived from the Greek word for breath. Thus, the study of the Holy Spirit is literally also a study of breath and wind. In further contemplation, I found comfort in the notion that a form of it has accompanied every person throughout the history of the Church—whether they know it or not. We are in relationship with God's Creation. Although it is not dependent upon us, we are dependent upon it. In our faith, to me, it is bizarre that we readily accept that God created the Heavens and the Earth, however, the moment we begin to speak about nature as a symbol or part of our faith we are likened to a Pocahontas singing "Colors of the Wind", or better yet a new-age, granola-eating, water-bottle-toting hippie who stands for everything. And yet, today, I would like to suggest that the ordinary, sometimes awe-inspiring, fear-provoking wind beckons us back into a relationship with the like-mannered Holy Spirit. It calls us back into the order that is God's wisdom revealed through Creation—a Creation that simultaneously includes God incarnate and our enemies. This being said, we most readily experience this relationship with the Holy Spirit when we remove the background noise in our lives.

This background noise or “white noise” is what drives our society. It is the “To Do” list that never can be fully completed. It is the consequential guilt that accompanies this inability to do everything we aspire to complete. These actions are taught from a young age in our goal-oriented worldview. For some, they may feel the Holy Spirit most fully in their busiest moments. But, for the majority of us, this approach to life distracts us from not only the ever-present wind, but also more importantly, the ever-present Holy Spirit. Similar to Paul and Jesus, each member in this congregation experiences or is more open to the Holy Spirit differently. However, in like manner to our Lord and St. Paul, we need to refocus our lenses in this life to see, feel, and embrace the Spirit of Truth more often. In today's reading from the Book of Acts it states, “In Him we live and move and have our being”. This statement is equally powerful when taken literally and figuratively. Without the ever-moving wind we would be unable to breathe (take a breath), to speak and be heard, or move. If we were not in a relationship with it, we would cease to live. Similarly, without our relationship with the Holy Spirit our lives as Christians would cease to be.

For me, I feel the Holy Spirit most when reading, writing, and reflecting on my life. For Steve Heilmer, the Holy Spirit is the breath that is taken in and then breathed out onto freshly chiseled marble—revealing the beauty of his God-inspired art. Similar to the author of the Psalms, for Miguel Escobar the Spirit is the air that reverberates in his vocal chords as he belts out one of his deeply moving songs. For Jacob Adams and many in this congregation, the Holy Spirit is the struggle when riding a bicycle into the wind or the joy of riding with it. And for my dear friend Jaison Ashbaugh the Holy Spirit is the cold, but fresh wind he chose to embrace when embarking on 18 months of hitchhiking adventures.

It was a similar wind that I remember complaining about one January morning when Jaison and I were walking on the way home from Morning Prayer here at St. Paul's. I was cursing the cold wind for penetrating my wintery layers and sending a spine-chilling feeling down my back. Usually, Jaison is one who keeps his thoughts to himself, but on this day he stopped walking, turned quickly with a burst of pent up anger, and said to me: “Mikey, you have to learn to embrace the wind and the cold!” Needless to say I didn't say much for the rest of the walk home. There was silence between us. It was the kind of silent spell that's hard to break, becoming more dense with every step we took. Not only was this one of the first times that Jaison had reprimanded me in our friendship, but he was completely right. Now if you know Jaison, you know that his wisdom exceeds his age. This, I believe, is not by coincidence. I believe it is because he is attentive to God's Creation. He is not only attentive to it, but embraces it in joyous times, humbling times, and when he feels the desire to curse it for making him suffer its conditions. He is right—I need to embrace the wind—my faith depends on it. Both it and the Holy Spirit were not going to cease moving because of my ill-conceived whining. Thus, not only do we need to be attentive to the Spirit when it aligns with our desires, but especially when it is in direct opposition to them. Only then, can we begin to fathom the wisdom and love that accompanies living in the Spirit.

In an age where we attempt to conceal ourselves from the wind with airtight sealed windows, we have ceased to learn how to embrace nature and its conditions. Instead, we attempt to create the perfect conditions for us to exist comfortably. Air conditioning and central air allow us “to be above” the brutality of the wind, nature, and maybe even the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, we attempt to construct the perfect environments for the Holy Spirit to come in and move us rather than seeing each and every fleeting moment (breathe again) as filled with this very Spirit of Truth, wisdom, and love.

It is this, the wind that I can feel even when I move my hands back and forth, that has remained constant throughout the history of the Judeo-Christian narrative. It was there at the beginning, brooding over the waters of the deep. It has inspired fear at the theophany at Mt. Sinai. It provided inconceivable refuge for the Jews at the Red Sea, and as today's readings suggest, it breathes life, moves us, and gives meaning and order to our very Being.

Therefore, it is my hope, that as you go from this church today that you may see the perpetually moving wind not as a hindrance or an opportunity to complain, but rather a beckoning to be attentive to relationship with God. It gives us opportunity to remember, acknowledge, and embrace the love that Jesus commands us to live in. When we do so, God's Creation will cease to be viewed as a hindrance or mystery in our lives. Instead, our moment-to-moment actions will cease to be void of God, but will be literally filled and in community with His wisdom through the Spirit of ultimate truth. This truth is one that we can see, hear, feel and take in. When we begin to embrace the Holy Spirit like the wind, Jesus' command to love our enemies will cease to be a command, but will hopefully begin to be as natural as taking a breath. Consequently, we will cease to live lives for ourselves only, but will have become temples of the Holy Spirit who have opened the eyes of others to the Glory of God apparent in every fleeting moment. Maybe then, this nonsensical faith will cease to be so mysterious when we acknowledge the beauty of earthly humility amongst us, embrace the shameful suffering that is accompanied in this life, and react in effervescent joy that we can praise God for the ability to breath, speak, move, feel, and above all—love. It is this love that will continue to reveal how He continually beckons us to be in a personal relationship with Him through the wind—the ultimate Spirit of Truth. Amen.