

## The Holy Spirit

(Sermon at Beaverkill Community Church, 7/9/2017)

To me, at least until recently, the Holy Spirit, as the animating part of the Creation in which we all find ourselves living, was a fairly formless, and therefore unimportant concept of religious belief. As a boy instructed in the Roman Catholic Church, I could understand the concept of a Father, I had a good father; and I could understand the concept of a dutiful Son, who came to earth to fulfill his Father's mandates, because I tried to be that way to my father. The idea of a pervasive Spirit, however, especially one called a Holy Ghost, was hard to grasp. I had no experience against which to measure this concept except a common ghost costume, easy to make, that would appear at Halloween, a bedsheet with two holes for eyes. Later, the essential necessity of such a Spirit began to make sense, especially as scientific discovery began to accelerate at an increasing rate and I became more acquainted with the Bible. Let's take a look at this subject, which we read about today in Paul's epistle.

First, as background, we know the Bible comes to us in the English language through a number of ancient languages, mainly Hebrew, Greek and Latin. The English phrase "Holy Spirit," often translated as "Holy Ghost," has an interesting word history which imparts a lot of content. The modern word "Ghost" comes from the Old English word "gast" which in turn comes from the Old High German word "geist." They all mean "spirit," "breath" or sometimes "wind." Thus, even today we might say upon a person's death that "he gave up the ghost," meaning he breathed his last. The word "spirit" is an English loan word from the Latin "spiritus" used to translate the Biblical Greek word "pneuma," (as in the modern English cognate "pneumatic") which means air, or breath, or soul or wind or their animating force. Some religious scholars identify the New Testament Holy Spirit with the "Ruach Hakodesh" (Holy Breath) in Jewish scripture, and with many similar names including: the *Ruach Elohim* (Spirit of God), *Ruach YHWH* (Spirit

of Yahweh), and *Ruach Hakmah* (Spirit of Wisdom). So, all these concepts come together in the word "spirit": breath, wind, air, life, soul, wisdom, animating force, and God.

Today's reading from Chapter 7 of Paul's letter to the Romans concerns the Holy Spirit, but also is part of a long and hard to understand explanation about what the law requires, how the law seems to set up a war between the spirit and the flesh, how one chooses of his free will to obey or not, and the consequences. A key sentence in today's reading from Paul is "For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin." There is an unfriendly relationship between the Spirit and the flesh. What is it?

I would say that a more understandable explanation of Paul's dichotomy of spirit and flesh is set forth in Chapter 5 of Paul's Letter to the Galatians. There, Paul admonishes the congregation to live by the Golden Rule, and he says:

"<sup>16</sup> Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. <sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup> envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>22</sup> By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. <sup>24</sup> And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit."

The Old and New Testaments contain numerous remarks and admonitions about the relationship of spirit and flesh. Almost all of them exalt the Spirit and denigrate the flesh, as Paul does.

For example, in the Gospels, Jesus admonishes Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane to "Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again, for example, in Chapter 6 of John, Jesus alienates some of his disciples with an admonition to eat His body and blood:

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. <sup>57</sup>Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. <sup>58</sup>This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever. . . It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."

For a final example, we see this dichotomy in Chapter 3 of John, where Jesus answers the Pharisee Nicodemus' question about why he needs to be born again to achieve salvation:

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' <sup>8</sup>The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Of course, the broader concept, perhaps the broadest concept, at work here, is the concept of the Holy Spirit as the Creator of the universe. In Genesis Chapter 1 we have the Spirit of God at the creation:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. <sup>2</sup> The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters."

The Gospel of John also begins with the Creation, but it uses word "Word" for the Holy Spirit:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God; <sup>3</sup> all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. <sup>4</sup> In him was life, and the life was the light of men. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. \* \* \*  
<sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father."

Like the word "spirit," "Word" in this passage has a significant history. It is a direct translation from the Biblical Greek word "logos", from which we get such English words as "logic." In the *Miriam Webster Dictionary*, its fourth meaning, when it is often capitalized, is "Logos," and "the expressed or manifested word of God." The Greek word "logos" has become an English word, when it means "the divine wisdom manifest in the creation, government, and redemption of the world . . ." and also "reason that in ancient Greek philosophy is the controlling principle in the universe."

So if we merge the list of words used in the Bible to define "Holy Spirit" and "Word," these are the concepts we find: breath, wind, air, life, soul, wisdom, animating force, logic, logos, manifest, reason, controlling principle, and God.

To me, The Holy Spirit must be the world of ideas and will, the world of mathematics, language, law and information, a part of, but different from, the world of matter, energy, and flesh.

We do not have time to go into it today, but a few years ago in this church I tried to show that the phrase "Kingdom,

Power, and Glory" used in the Lord's Prayer is a shorthand for the words "matter, energy, and information," the words that physicists use when they try describe the universe as explained by the Einstein's Theory of Relativity. The information part of that matter/energy/information Trinity, and I use that word trinity purposely, is the organizing factor of life as we now are coming through science to understand life. It is the genetic code contained in every living cell of every living creature. It is the code contained in each man's flesh that makes him distinctive from all others, which gives him his own characteristics and identifying markers, his own name, known to God and accountable to God for the acts of his free will, the free will which God gave us to choose between right and wrong.

Sometimes we know clearly that what we are doing is wrong. Sometimes we know clearly that what we are doing is right. Sometimes we are not sure. For such occasions we have forgiveness.

But, as Paul explains to us, "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit."

Amen.