

Continuing Education

Acts 19:1-7

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery on January 11, 2015 at Duke Chapel

The disciples in our passage declare, “We’ve not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” But on a particular weekday in Princeton Seminary’s Miller Chapel, essentially a Presbyterian meetinghouse built for worship in 1834, the preacher spoke of the Spirit as if he was his best friend and closest confidante. It was my first year in seminary. This student in the senior class began to preach and as he proclaimed, he interjected the phrase, “Help me, Holy Ghost!” One time. Two times. Three times. And then I lost count of how many times he said, “Help me, Holy Ghost!” Maybe it was a prayer for him in the moment because he realized the sermon wasn’t going over too well in this ecumenical seminary congregation made up of students, faculty, and staff. Maybe he thought that if he said “Holy Ghost” ten times, we might actually pay attention to the sermon and that might make his sermon more Spirit-filled. But saying “Holy Ghost or Spirit” does not guarantee that one is in the Spirit, led by the Spirit, or bearing the fruit of the Spirit. There are many people doing things in the name of God that have nothing to do with God. To play off of a spiritual, “everybody talkin’ ‘bout the Spirit, ain’t got the Spirit.”

As we sat in holy shock that morning, it became more obvious why we implicitly agreed with him and silently said our own version of his prayer, “Help him, Holy Ghost.” Help him and that sermon. Or we said our own, “Help me, Holy Ghost”—help me endure what is being said. It became clear that something was sorely wrong when he said to those of us in the congregation, “You won’t praise God because you’re just mean.” It is an unforgettable moment during my seminary days. Maybe we didn’t praise God because we were mean but because the sermon was so messy and smelly. I don’t think the Holy Ghost answered his prayer during his sermon on that day. But our prayer was finally answered and we were finally helped when he sat down and the sermon was over. This does not mean that we fully understood what happened that morning because some of us who were there are still searching for the black box from that sermon to see what actually went wrong on that morning in Miller chapel. There’s nothing wrong with saying, “Help me, Holy Ghost” but do we really understand who and for what we are pleading?

The Holy Spirit is such a concealed, revealed mystery, a wind that hovered over the face of the waters at creation (Gen 1), a “wind that blows where it wills and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know from where it comes or where it goes” (John 3). On the day of Pentecost, “suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house...divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them...All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2). Wind. Fire. The Hebrew word for ‘spirit,’ *ruach*, means ‘wind’ or ‘breath.’ How do you talk about breath when you can’t speak about breath without breath? The Hebrew word is feminine. The Greek word for ‘spirit’ is neuter. We grasp for language to talk about the Spirit of God—he, she, it. Some “thingify” the Spirit and can’t make sense of this third person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit. The Lord, the Giver of Life, the one in whom, German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, says, “our life wakes up.” Having to do with life and new creation—that’s the Spirit. We may get the Father and the Son, but this Holy Ghost or Spirit is sometimes perceived as the stepchild in the divine family of the Trinity.

Maybe there are some even today who can say, “we’ve not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” It would be hard to find that person, I believe, even if they had only heard about what the Congregation youth call, “The Holy Ghost Weenie Roast.” There is mystery and not always clarity about the nature and work of the Spirit.

What is clear is that from the days of the early church, the Holy Spirit has been deemed essential for the church’s life and mission. At the Eucharist, there is the *epiclesis*, the invocation for the power of the Holy Spirit to come upon the bread and wine. At the benediction, you may hear “and the fellowship or *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit.” The Spirit is also the one who creates the church, the *ekklesia*, in Acts. Without the

Spirit, there is no power, no *koinonia* nor *ekklesia*. Thus, the Spirit is vital for an effectual church community and experience of God. That doesn't mean the Holy Spirit has always been primetime in theology or in the language of the church. I think the opposite has been true in the Western world, in general.

What we have, this morning, are disciples in Ephesus who actually confess, "We've not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." The mainline denomination known as the 'frozen chosen' didn't declare this, this time. The book of Acts is all about the Spirit. It would be better named the Acts of the Holy Spirit and not the Acts of the Apostles. The Spirit that was upon Jesus at the beginning of his ministry and came upon him like a dove at his baptism permeates these sacred pages of Acts. Yet, there are still those who have not heard that there is a Holy Spirit. Funny how the Spirit might be right under your nose or in your very breath, and you not even recognize her. And what is intriguing is that those who never heard about the Spirit are in fact disciples. Paul asks them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?"

They were believers, disciples, but they did not know everything nor hear everything that there is to hear about God, the church, and faith. Their learning was incomplete; they had inadequate understanding because there was so much more to be taught and learned. They believed without full understanding. They came to know God without knowing everything about God and knowing everything God does. There is grace in gradual revelation—that we are not condemned or ridiculed for not knowing everything about God or the Holy Spirit or scripture or the history of the church or how this or that works. We are not called to be god but to learn from God and be lifelong learners enrolled in continuing spiritual education. We are not called to have all the answers and know everything there is to know but to keep asking questions as a practice of faithful Christian discipleship like a child who might ask, "If God made spiders, why do people squish them?"

Apollos was in Corinth when Paul went to Ephesus and Apollos, who was "an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures," had been instructed in the Way of the Lord, spoke with enthusiasm and taught about Jesus, eventually, we are told, is taken aside and "explained the 'Way of God... more accurately'" (Acts 18). He was a believer already. He was an eloquent preacher even, but he still had more to learn. He had not arrived at full knowledge but was open to perpetual learning and growth. In an university education, you don't learn everything there is to learn about your academic discipline but you do learn how to learn.

In many ways, the rite of baptism is just the beginning for a believer or a household of faith. It is the beginning of the lifelong journey of faith and learning. It is a sacramental call to begin, a call to continue to educate oneself about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the church, discipleship, and mission in the world. Baptism says, "I want to be a lifelong learner in the school of the Spirit of Jesus. I want to travel the path from my heart to my head and from my head to my heart and I know these lessons take a lifetime to learn." Sign me up for these classes taught by God. Baptism immerses you into God's school and the bell never rings to signal the end of classes; there is no recess. God's school of faith and learning and worship is eternal.

These Ephesian disciples are teachable and have a willingness to learn more in order to grow in their understanding and faith, intellectually and spiritually. As disciples, they recognize that we don't have to have all of the answers, every 'i' dotted or 't' crossed. There is a humble acknowledgement that the Christian life is one of faith seeking understanding with an emphasis on the 'seeking.' The journey. The process of gradually learning, continuing education, growing in faith such that we discover things about ourselves and God we never knew. At the age of 9 or 90, we can always grow and develop. You don't know yourself fully even now nor do you know God fully—Father, Son or Holy Spirit. We see in a glass dimly (1 Cor 13).

There's so much to learn about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the world, and it is an expression of grace that we have the capacity to still learn and the opportunity to be taught by others when we don't fully

comprehend. Continuing education is a gift. Implicit in this passage is a call to keep asking questions, keep listening, keep being curious and open to new ideas and fresh experiences. Don't be so sure you are always right (!)—those are the ones who may not truly comprehend what it means to be a disciple. To think you are always right is an indication that something is wrong because disciples know that at times they will be wrong. These disciples were not afraid to learn from Paul and even one's lack of knowledge about something, in this case the Holy Spirit, does not mean that that Something, the Holy Spirit, is not real or present. Just because we've never heard of or experienced something doesn't mean it doesn't exist and it doesn't mean it's not something or someone we need. It may be exactly what we need in our lives. But this takes intellectual and spiritual humility and an awareness of the vastness of God.

Because of their willingness to hear and learn, Paul teaches a lesson on baptism that touches their minds and bodies, literally their tongues. He makes a distinction between John's baptism of repentance and baptism in Jesus, which is also a baptism into the world of the Spirit. In other words, baptism in Jesus is also a baptism of the Holy Spirit. When you are baptized into Jesus and therefore call yourself a 'Christian' implied in this very word is the idea of being anointed. Jesus 'the Christ,' means Jesus 'the anointed one.' Being a Christian means to be anointed by the Spirit of Jesus. Just as the Spirit descended on Jesus in his baptism and the Spirit comes on him at the start of his ministry, the Spirit comes upon us. John baptizes with water but Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16-17). This is more than forgiveness of sins and cleansing; this is empowerment for living and serving God in the world, to be witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Baptism has been called the door to the church but it is also the door into God's vineyard where there is much work to do (John Broadus) and so much love to give to drive out all of the hate.

These disciples learn what it means to be plunged into the power of a pentecostal God who breaks through all kinds of boundaries. Paul lays hands on the disciples so that they come to know God in and through his and their bodies. Paul touches them that they might be touched and they "spoke in tongues and prophesied." The Spirit gives them the gift of speech, a way of proclamation that they had never experienced. It was new for them but they were willing to grow and broaden their horizons. They not only heard about the Spirit but also experienced the Spirit on that day.

And some things you just can't explain because you can't exhaust the inexhaustible God. The world these disciples were baptized into was something new—the sphere of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is a complex divine reality with boundless resources. What they experience through the laying on of hands is tongue talking and prophesying, which is ecstasy and comprehensibility (John Levison). Unintelligibility and intelligibility. The gift of the Spirit they receive is not to understand and to understand. It is a liberating gift not to know everything, which is a guarantor that we are not god.

The Spirit is mysterious complexity and variety and true disciples know this. They know that they don't know but have an open heart and mind to learn further, to see things in a new way. The Chinese artist, He Chi, has a bright, sharp, multicolored painting called, "The Holy Spirit Coming." It is blue, red, purple, green, yellow, white, black, brown, in all of their shades. Three Asian women figures in postures of prayer and praise, are placed next to each other, looking up and out at the viewer, with a red fire or dove resting on each of their heads, in the foreground of the painting, but intertwined with their figures are parts of building structures like a bridge or Greek revival columns, and a candle on a table. Two of the women have their mouths closed but one of them has an open mouth. One woman looks like she has one eye closed; the others don't. I haven't asked He Chi about it yet. I have so many questions to ask. I see something different every time I study it—a new shade of color, a new eye angle, a different image or detail, and I wonder what it all means. I don't totally understand it but I don't totally understand God either. Like the Spirit, this complex piece is an aesthetic mystery. I'm sure He Chi can give me insight into it as the painter but what it means for viewers probably can't be exhausted.

Its meaning is as variegated as the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world and in our lives. From shouts to silence, from dancing to sitting, from lit candles with crosses to strobe lighting with worship bands, from storefront Pentecostal churches in Durham to Paris' Notre Dame Cathedral. The Spirit is diverse in manifestation yet unified in one love. Willing disciples of Jesus are made malleable spiritually through the baptism of the Spirit as we are immersed in the broad, expansive, inclusive, all-encompassing, bridge-building, outward-gazing, ecumenical ministry of the Spirit to the ends of the earth. When we are willing to learn more, God is able to stretch us as wide as the work of the Spirit, stretch us beyond our capability and know-how. In the Spirit, we come to know how much we don't know as disciples.

It is when we have not heard and when we don't know that we can be used of God, the divine pedagogue. Some may call us ignorant but show me a disciple who isn't. We have so much more to learn in the faith and God has so much more to teach us in 2015. But do you possess a humble, holy curiosity? Are you willing to learn from God and others? Are you teachable? Are you hungry and thirsty for spiritual knowledge? That is the only entry requirement for God's school of continuing education. God gives us the Holy Spirit to fill us with ecstasy and comprehensibility, not knowing and knowing. This is "the Way." We know that we will never fully know on earth. But God does not leave us alone in our unawareness, but provides the Teacher of teachers, the Holy Spirit, to dwell upon and within us, so be brave, take courage, seek, and even if you don't fully understand now, take the risk, and pray, "Help me, Holy Ghost."