

Epiphany 5
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

February 8, 2015
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God, the Holy Spirit

This time of year is a brown time. Most plants are in winter dormancy at this time of year, their leaves long ago turned color and dropped to the ground. Their sap is in their roots, hidden below the ravages of the weather. Think of what will be happening in the dormant plants coming up next month and into April. The sap will begin to rise from the roots. It will flow up through the cambium layer of the bark, into the stems, and out into the twigs, where it will swell the buds, until at just the right time (unless you're one of my apple trees, who sometimes get it wrong,) the buds will burst into flowers, and the stems and twigs will begin to sprout leaves. The sap will run through each young leaf, through the veins out into the tips, until every cell of that leaf will have the life-giving flow of the sap.

These leaves are a good illustration of the Holy Spirit's role in our existence. Our faith teaches us that the Holy Spirit blew over the unformed earth in the beginning. By the Holy Spirit all creation comes into being, drawing its life and existence directly from God. Psalms 65 and 104 paint beautiful word pictures of the action of God intimately engaged in creation, keeping it in existence by God's ongoing work. Psalm 139 talks about God's movement in creating the writer of the Psalm. One could say that the Spirit of God moved over the unformed me, bringing me to existence and maintaining me here—and you, and you, and you, and all of us and the world we live in.

One could say that in creation God sends the Holy Spirit up out of the roots of Heaven, into the foundations of the earth, up through our ancestors and our parents, and finally, into the bodies and souls that make us, giving us what scientists call the life principle, something that they can locate, name and describe, but cannot create or really tell where it comes from. Just like a leaf without sap would quickly wither and die, so we without the Spirit of God infusing our spirits with life and vitality would disappear into nothingness.

Creation is one thing the Holy Spirit does, but there is more. A transformer is a device that changes the voltage of an electric charge. You know that little black box on the end of the itty bitty charge cord for your phone? That's a transformer. It takes 110 volt power from the wall and steps it down to what your phone needs. Get the wrong transformer and it can blow up your phone! The Holy Spirit is like a divine transformer. The power we draw from the Spirit of God is the power of unconditional love. Love is compatible with certain things, and incompatible with others. Therefore, when we

misuse that power to do selfish things we violate the compatibility of our source. God is merciful and loves us, so that we do not cease to exist, or blow up like a phone on the wrong charger, but we do diminish our output. We compromise our potential for when we do that in reality we live a lie, misusing what has been granted to us for ends that are incompatible with its purpose. This is sin. One of the things the Holy Spirit does is let us know, informing our consciences as to the real nature of our choices.

And of course, there is more. Let's go back to the leaves. Say a leaf grows on a tree, full of the sap of the roots. But something happens. It gets attacked by a fungus. The leaf becomes sick. In some instances the plant can throw off the infection on its own. Antibodies or whatever it is plants use, swarm to the place of illness and fix the problem. The sap is what takes them there. The gardener can apply a treatment. I know for some rose bushes, the treatment goes into the ground around them. The roots suck up the medicine and transport it to the leaves in the sap. The sap becomes the vehicle for healing. The Holy Spirit heals us. It is the power of God to work against illness. The illness can be physical, emotional, mental or spiritual, for the Holy Spirit touches them all. The Holy Spirit is the power of the God of life, to bring about abundant life. When we anoint with oil and pray, as instructed to in the book of James, the oil is like spiritual medicine, invoking this aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit teaches us and leads us into all truth. Maybe the first clear incident of this is with Peter and Cornelius, recorded in Acts 10. Cornelius is a Gentile, a commanding officer in the occupying force in Judea. He is also pious and seeks to do good. He gets a vision from God to send for Peter who will teach him what he needs to know. Problem: Peter is a good Jew. A good Jew will not enter a Gentile's house. So Peter gets a vision, too. A sheet comes down from heaven with all kinds of unclean animals in it. "Rise, Peter, kill and eat," says a voice.

"But they're unclean," responds Peter.

"Do not call unclean what I have called clean!" retorts the voice. And we know the story, Peter goes to Cornelius's house, and the Holy Spirit shows up. Peter gets in trouble with the rest of the church leaders, who are also Jews. But when Peter tells them what happened they give thanks to God that salvation has also come to the Gentiles.

This is the pattern that one can trace throughout the history of the Church, by the Holy Spirit the church did its best to respond faithfully (in the light of the wisdom of the times,) to

- The fall of the Roman Empire,
- The rise of Islam,

- The discovery of ancient texts like Aristotle,
- New scientific discoveries,
- The Renaissance and the Reformation,
- The printing press,
- The Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution,
- In our country and in our past, the issues of slavery, women's suffrage, racism, etc.

Right up to the present time the Holy Spirit in the Church helps us to respond faithfully to the changing world around us even now, giving us something good to say about stem-cell research, immigration, changing views on sexuality and smart phones in Church. Sometimes we get it better than others, but if we are to believe Jesus' words, then we must believe that the influence of the Holy Spirit was every time.

The Holy Spirit comforts us. The word translated in John 14 is Paracletos, one who comes along beside to walk with us. When we feel comforted in our faith, when we feel like we're not alone, when we know that we have support for our journey the Holy Spirit is at work.

There is a whole lot more, but no time to talk about it now.

So what does that mean? Paul, in Romans 8 talks about living in the Spirit. He has just finished one of the most raw, gut-wrenching passages he ever wrote.

*That which I do not want to do I do,
And that which I want to do I do not do.
I find in my members the law of sin.
I wretched man that I am, who will save me from this body of death?*

And he concludes with a triumphant answer, "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory in Jesus Christ our Lord!"

Paul's word for that part of us that is unruly, incurably self-centered and prideful, is "the flesh." In today's language a good translation of the same idea is "ego." Our egos are good for us, they are in charge of self-preservation and self-maintenance. But the ego is quickly seduced by pride, and it moves from self-preservation to self enhancement. It's natural self-focus goes awry, and we live egocentrically. We do bad stuff to one another because we're not focused on them, we're focused on us. We use the energy of the Spirit of God in our creation to do things that violate and deny the love from which we come.

Paul's solution is to live in the Spirit. What part of us knows how to do that? The part that is closest to the Source—our spirits, that part of us that knows how to love, that acknowledges its source. Living in the Spirit, then, is to die to the pride of the ego, and to learn to live in love.

What does it take to do that? The Scriptures have always been the primary document in the life of the church. In the Scriptures we learn what it means to live in the Spirit, to love as we have been loved. Wednesday the 18th is Ash Wednesday. Take ashes in acknowledgement of the ultimate ruin of the rule of the ego, then begin the study program for this year, listening 28 minutes a day for the whole of Lent until you have listened through the whole of the New Testament. Let it sink in deeply, ground you and teach not only your mind, but your heart. Listen to it as a love letter from God.

Ask God for that deep awareness of the Spirit of God within you, enlivening you, teaching you, healing you and comforting you. And ask God for that ability in our community of faith to listen deeply and faithfully to the Spirit, as we seek to be led, taught and guided by the Holy Spirit of God.