

Pentecost 2021: "How Do We Know That Any of This Is True? Enter the Holy Spirit!"  
Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15  
May 22-23, 2021  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

"Stump the Presenter" is a fun activity we recently enjoyed during Confirmation Connection Zoom class. Ned invited the kids to ask any question they wanted in about 6 different categories, so broad that they really could have asked anything under the sun. Our youth asked some easy questions like, "How old is the church building?" (The answer is 174 years old; next year is Holy Trinity's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday and the building was 75 years old when the Lutherans moved in.) Some of the answers they hoped for we didn't know, so we promised to get back to them with "How many people are buried in the cemetery?" and "What's the oldest grave?" We were almost out of time, and Ned invited one final question. The one we got didn't **completely** surprise us, but certainly made us think good and hard, then and ever since: "How do we know that any of this is true?"

Ned and Peter both shared from the heart, how they know our faith is true. I shared that I **believe** in God because I **feel** God, I **experience** God's presence now and have my whole life long. I admitted that sometimes I've felt very alone and wondered if God cared, if God listened, if God would or could help me. There were times when only **after the fact** did I realize that God was quite close, either leading me down good paths or protecting me when I went on dangerous detours, healing me, both body and soul, forgiving me, strengthening me. I guess I was telling them that my faith is more a matter of the heart than of the head.

Pentecost is as good a time as any to ask, "How do **you** know that any of this is true?" The kids want to know, because there are many voices in this world telling them

that it's **not** true, that intelligent people would never believe this stuff, that faith in a Higher Power, no less faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, our saving Lord, is ridiculous. But this is precisely what we **do** believe! We believe this by God's grace.

*The Small Catechism* is a handbook of faith that Martin Luther wrote, coming up on 500 years ago, to help the male head of the household teach the basics of the faith to his wife, the kids, the servants. Household dynamics have changed a bit over the centuries, but the Gospel message, the Christian theology in *The Small Catechism*, still hold true. In his explanation of "I believe in the Holy Spirit" in the Apostles Creed, Luther wrote:

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy, kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.<sup>1</sup>

It is the Holy Spirit who makes faith possible, who enables us to hear and trust God's promises, who brings forth life and love, who counters despair and plants hope, who makes possible new beginnings, works miracles, heals sicknesses of the human spirit, makes sure that sin is not the end of us by granting forgiveness, and makes sure that death is not the end of us by raising us up again.

Can you tell I love the Holy Spirit?? It hasn't always been so. Till I was in high school I didn't have a clue about the Holy Spirit other than knowing the Spirit is the third Person of the Trinity: "In the name of the Father and of the Son + and of the Holy Spirit." Then (too long a story to tell right now) I became involved with the charismatic renewal and was surrounded by people who credited the Holy Spirit with enlivening their faith, making Scripture come alive, deepening their prayer life, and nurturing the faith community in which they found comfort, challenge, and grace.

The Holy Spirit gets less press, less attention than our Father in Heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ. She has been called “the forgotten Person of the Trinity.” And yet, the Holy Spirit is the very **Breath** of God who literally **inspires** us! In Hebrew and in Greek the feminine word for *spirit*, *breath* and *wind* are all the same. In the beginning of Genesis, a **wind** moves over the deep. In one of the creation stories in Genesis, God **breathes** the breath of life into lifeless Adam. Those of you who have ever had serious surgery or lung ailments have probably been given an spirometer, the little gizmo with a mouthpiece you blow into, to lift a ball inside a tube that looks like a thermometer. The harder you blow, the higher it goes! So in the creation story God inspires Adam literally, and in our lives we believe the Holy Spirit inspires us with faith.

In the Nicene Creed we name the Holy Spirit as “the Lord, the giver of life.” We believe that physical **birth** is a gift of God. The angel Gabriel tells Mary that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her, so the Child to be conceived will be called holy. We also believe that the Holy Spirit is the source of our **rebirth** in Holy Baptism. The Holy Spirit **is** the “living water” which washes us clean on our baptismal day and every day afterwards, the living water that spiritually hydrates us, revives us when our souls are wilting, restores us to favor and communion with our Lord whenever we turn away from the things, people or activities that have driven a wedge between us and our Lord, and we ask forgiveness.

Our conscience is often the voice of the Holy Spirit, showing us the holy way to go, acting like a spiritual GPS, tutting over the turn we missed or annoyingly announcing, “Recalculating! Recalculating!” to get us back on the straight and narrow again. It’s possible and even tempting, at times, to turn down the volume of our conscience, but the Holy Spirit

does have a way of breaking through our willful deafness and overcoming the cacophony, the worldly noises, that distracts us. (No wonder in *The Screwtape Letters* C.S. Lewis writes that the devil **loves** noise – and hates silence.)

In addition to being the Giver of life, Miracle-worker of rebirth, Bestower of forgiveness, Source of inspiration, holy conscience, spiritual GPS, let's also think of the Holy Spirit as a spiritual Marie Kondo ☺. For those who haven't heard of her, Marie Kondo is a decluttering guru, a life coach for those who have a hard time letting go of **stuff**: clothes, shoes, papers, books, you name it. She advises us to hold an item and ask, "Do I love it?" If the answer is no, we say, "Thank you" to whatever it is and put it in the give-away pile. Where, you may ask, does the Holy Spirit fit into this scenario? Many of us have to admit that, in all honesty, our lives are cluttered. If our lives are too busy to worship with the community of faith, either virtually or in person, our lives are cluttered. If our lives are too busy to find time for personal prayer, our lives are cluttered. If our lives are too busy to find time to help another person or to further a cause about which we feel passionate, our lives are cluttered. If our lives are too busy to include a good night's sleep, enough play, healthy meals, our lives are cluttered.

The Holy Spirit shows up as wind and flame in today's Pentecost story from the Book of Acts, right? Wind and fire. Fields are sometimes burned to prepare them for the next crop. Some pine trees only regenerate when the intense heat of a forest fire causes cones to open up and drop seeds on the forest floor. The mythical phoenix rises up out of its own ashes, a powerful symbol of resurrection. The winds of hurricanes, nor'easters, cyclones, tornadoes, can flatten or rearrange everything in their path. Once "the old" is gone, there is an opening for "the new." The Holy Spirit sometimes takes things away to

make room for something better or simply to make room, period. She's depicted in our Holy Trinity stained glass as a dove. A dove needs wing-room, space to fly unhindered, freedom to alight where She pleases. An uncluttered life is the Spirit's delight. It is the perfect setting for us to live out the beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart," which has also been interpreted, "Blessed are those who will one thing."

Have I mentioned that the Holy Spirit is the Comforter? The Counselor? The Giver of the gifts of the Spirit: wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord, joy in God's presence? The Grower of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, generosity, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23)? The **Truth**-teller? The **Encourager**? The **Enlightener**? The **Empowerer**? The **Rescuer**? I could go on and on, and maybe I already have! The big umbrella under which all of that stands is the Holy Spirit as Sanctifier, the One who makes us holy. Martin Luther teaches in *The Small Catechism* that the Holy Spirit makes us holy through the communion of saints, the community of the faithful, where we receive the Sacraments, hear the Word of God, live out faith-active-in-love, and embrace hope.

"How do we know any of this is true?" Not by our own understanding or strength but by the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens and makes us holy. May our lives attest that "This is most certainly true." Let's remember: others are watching us to see if it's so.

Amen

<sup>1</sup>*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), p. 1162.

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