

“The Holy Spirit and You”

I still remember, at one of the Bible camps I attended, years ago, when I was a kid, how they were (conducting a survey) of all the kids. It was a simple survey, a one-question survey. They had us take out a piece of paper and write down our answer to one question. The question was, “If you had one wish, and you were promised (by God) that your wish would be granted, what would you wish for?” That was the survey. “If you had one wish and you knew God would grant it, what would it be?”

Now, the survey was being conducted that summer as a small part of a (much larger) research project that was designed to identify the interests and concerns of young people in the mid 1960's. It was eventually, (as I understood it), to be the basis for a study that would be used in churches to help reach the next generation for Christ.

In that sense, it might be a question worth asking today, because the challenge of reaching the next generation (for Jesus) is a challenge (for every generation). It's always there. In fact, as the times change and the challenges we face in the church change, it's the one challenge (facing the church) that will never change.

How would you answer that question? Wherever you are in life, young person or not? How would you answer? If you had one wish and you knew God would answer it, what would it be?

And you can't answer (as some of my friends answered) and wish for a hundred more wishes. No, just one. (What would it be?) Happiness? Long life? A stronger bond in your family? Good health? World peace? An end to poverty and hunger and war?

As I think back on that summer, I honestly can't remember the answer I gave to that one-question survey. (I couldn't tell you how I answered.) What I can tell you is what we were asked when it was over. What we were asked (when it was over) is whether we considered, (as our one wish), a stronger (and more connected) relationship with God. Did we even consider, as our one wish, (they asked us), the relationship we had with our Maker? (I still remember.)

Let's turn to our text. Today we're in the second of two weeks in the fourteenth chapter in the gospel of John. It's a chapter (as we mentioned last week) that comes on the final night before Jesus was to go to the cross. He's preparing them (in this chapter) for what's to come (in the next few hours) and (at the same time), letting them know what to expect (over the course of the next several weeks) when he's finally gone.

Now, this is an aside (for a moment), but do you know what's coming up this next week? Do you know what event in Jesus' life (this next week) we'll be remembering? This coming Thursday is the fortieth day after Easter. It's Ascension Day. It's the day we remember Jesus, (after his resurrection), going back into heaven.

In this chapter, Jesus is pointing the disciples to that day and, even more so, to ten days after that (after his ascension) when he will send his Holy Spirit.

What's interesting (in this chapter), in his parting words to his disciples, in his last chance to tell them what's truly (and deeply) on his heart; what's interesting is that this entire chapter centers around the connection Jesus has with the Father, and the connection that is possible for us (with Jesus and the Father) through the Holy Spirit.

In other words, this fourteenth chapter is all about relationship. It's all about the kind of relationship God has (in and with himself) as a Triune God, (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and the kind of relationship he (as a three-in-one God) wants to have with us.

What's also interesting, (based upon what Jesus says), is that this relationship we are to have with God is not possible without the Spirit. What Jesus says is that without the Spirit, we'll never be able to have the relationship (with God) we were created to have.

Let's talk (for a few moments) about the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is that one person in the Trinity that seems to be not quite as well understood as the other two. The Father is our creator, our provider, the one who watches over us and protects us. The Son is the one who came into our world to become our Savior. (He carried out the Father's plan.) He died for our sin. He was raised to give us life. He's our Lord. He's our Master. He's the one we are called to follow.

The Holy Spirit, it's not always so clear. The Spirit is the one, (Jesus says), that third person in God, who is (here today) to make it all work. He is the one who takes what our Lord has accomplished and helps us (as his followers) come to faith. In other words, the Spirit brings it all together, helps it all to become real for us.

Some of the names we find in the Bible; he's our Counselor. He's our Comforter. He's sometimes referred to as the Spirit of Truth. He guides us. He leads us. He points us to what's real and to what counts. In that sense, the Spirit's work is to point us back to Jesus, to help us understand and believe that what Jesus did on the cross and in his resurrection was for us.

One of my seminar professors used to say that the work of the Holy Spirit "in us" is as necessary as Christ's work was "for us." (That's a good way to put it.) The Spirit's work "in us" is as necessary as Christ's work "for us."

In other words, everything Jesus did (while he was here) could have happened – his teachings, his death, his resurrection - but if we never come to understand it (and believe it), what difference does it make? Jesus could have died a thousand deaths, but without faith in what he has done (and accomplished), the work of the Holy Spirit, what finally would have been accomplished?

Do you want to know a theory of mine? I have a theory about the three great celebrations (or festivals) in the church. I don't want to get ahead of things, because we're not quite yet there. But (each year) there are three big celebrations: Christmas, Easter, and (two weeks from now), the Day of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Do you know what my theory is? Do you know why I think the first two (Christmas and Easter) are celebrated (in a big way) in the world, and the other one, (the third), for the most part, goes unnoticed? Do you know what I think happens?

Here's my theory. Here's what I think happens. The world has left this (Holy Spirit) celebration alone because (honestly), if you starting paying attention to it (and let it do its thing), it starts hitting too close to home. It gets too personal.

Just think about it. Christmas is the celebration of God coming into our world. It's the story of what God (in the baby Jesus) was doing for us. Easter is the celebration of our Lord's resurrection. Again, it's the story of what God (in his Son) was accomplishing on our behalf. But the Holy Spirit, the work of the Spirit is not what God has done for us, but (rather) what God wants to do in us.

You see, you can celebrate Christmas, and nothing has to change. (It should, but it doesn't have to.) Life goes on. Even Easter, you can come and go on Easter and your life can stay the same. (For many people it does, and it's sad, because they've missed it, but it can.) It happens every year. But when the Holy Spirit starts to work, when the Spirit of Truth begins to speak (into your life), that's when things begin to change (in your life), and what changes (when he begins to speak) into your life is you.

"The Holy Spirit and You." That's not just the title for today's message. It's the way in which God is at work to carry out his work. It happens through the Spirit. It happens when the Spirit of God starts working in your life.

Jesus said, "It is to your advantage that I go away." (He says), you're better off when I'm gone than while I'll still here. When I leave you (he says) and go back into heaven, that's when I'll send one who will never leave you until we meet in heaven.

In today's text (he says), "If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever, the Spirit of Truth. The world cannot accept him (Jesus said), because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you."

When the Spirit starts working "in you" that's when what God wants to see happen "in you" starts to work. There's a connection that begins to take place between our love for Jesus and the way we choose to live. (That's what happens.) And it happens because the relationship we have with Father (through the Spirit) in Christ becomes more real.

Those two essentials in the Christian life are brought together when the Spirit begins to work. Love for Jesus and obedience to his word. Those are two halves (in the Christian life) that make up the whole. Those are two parts to the Christian life that provide us (when brought together) with more than just a part.

"If you love me, you'll obey what I command...If you believe in me (Jesus says), then you'll end up doing (in your life) what I've called you to do." But it's not going to happen without the Spirit. It's not going to work until the Holy Spirit begins to work.

I came across a (cute little story) this past week about a little boy who was riding his tricycle around the block, over and over again. About the fifth time around, a man who was watching (it all happen), asked him what he was doing, why he was riding around and around? The little boy told him. He said he was running away from home. The man asked him, "If you're running away from home, why do you keep going around the block?" The boy replied, "Because my Mom told me that I'm not allowed to cross the street."

It's a cute little story, but the point is clear. Obedience (to those you love) will keep you close. Loving those (with whom you are close) will keep you obedient to what they say.

What it is, it's one of those "chicken and egg" things in the Christian life. (You tell me.) Are we obedient to our Lord because we love him? Or, does our love for our Lord grow out of our obedience? (Theologically, I could argue either way.) Realistically, maybe it's both. I don't know.

What I do know is that our love for Jesus and our obedience to what he has said comes as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit. It's the Spirit of God that draws us to Jesus, and as we are drawn to him (and to his Word), that's when our relationship with God (and the way we choose to live) begins to change.

Martin Luther says it well when he talks about the third part of our confession in the Apostles' Creed. We say (in the creed), "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord." (And in the third part), we say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church."

Look at what he says about the Spirit and about the importance of the Spirit's work in us. In his explanation, here's what he says. And if you want to read it with me, let's say it together.

He says, "I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort, believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in true faith.

In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it united with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

In this Christian Church day after day he fully forgives my sins and the sins of all believers. On the last day he will raise me and all the dead, and give me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true."

That's what the Spirit does. That's what the Spirit promises. That's what the Spirit can make happen in you.

And so, you tell me. A one-question survey. Anything you want and God promises to give it, whatever it is. One request. One wish granted and it's all yours. What would it be?

Let me close today with a challenge. Let's try this (together) for one week. I challenge you, each day, for the next seven days, before you go to work, before you head off to school, before you (start doing) whatever it is you're planning to do, (I challenge you) to start each day with this simple prayer.

"Lord, make me receptive to your Spirit. Lord, open my heart and my life to what you have in mind for me today. Father, draw me to Jesus, fill me with a passion to not only love him, but to be obedient to what he says. Even if only for this day, Lord, make my one request a desire for growing in my relationship with you."

For seven days, starting today, I challenge you to make growing in your relationship with the Father, through the Holy Spirit, in Christ, your one-question survey answer...because, his work is as important "in us" as Christ's work is "for us." Amen.