

“Why We Need the Holy Spirit”

Today we're looking at the person and work of the Holy Spirit and why we need the Spirit in our lives. In two weeks, we'll be celebrating the Day of Pentecost, that day when the Spirit was first poured out on those (early believers) and the Church began to grow.

Before turning to our text and to (some of the things) Jesus has to say (to us), I want touch on some of the things that have been happening and that are (going to happen) here at the church that I believe will help set the stage.

If you were here last week, you know that we celebrated 40 years of Christian education on our campus. It was a wonderful time together, celebrating all that God has done (in and through) our school over the past 40 years. We're now in the last two weeks of our elementary and in the process of saying our goodbyes. If you've seen the displays in the Fellowship Hall, you might want to check them out. It's quite the history.

At the same time, we're gearing up for what's in front of us with our Preschool. We hired a new Director, Jeanette Adams, who comes to us with nine years of teaching experience, an excitement (and energy) about what we already have in place and the possibilities of what might happen (moving forward), as well as a deep and abiding love for and (faith in) Jesus Christ. Her addition to our staff, even though not official until mid-June, is already proving to be a gift.

We're also, as you know, in the process of forming a Call Team that will be elected at our congregational meeting next Sunday. As we look to our future and what lies ahead (on that front), it's important that we plan in advance and think through (and pray through) where we believe God is leading.

In that regard and in the interest of (full transparency), the nominations for the next NALC Bishop have now been made public. They're on the NALC website, if you're interested. Bishop Bradosky will be stepping away from his position this fall, and a new leader will be selected at the national gathering in August. There are twelve names that have been submitted and mine is one of those twelve.

With that in mind, I'd ask for your prayers during these next two months. Obviously, it's a time of uncertainty and transition for our denomination, as well as for (those of us) more intimately involved in the process. On each of these fronts, we are all truly (and literally) “waiting on the Lord” to see where he might lead.

Along with all of that, is the challenge and opportunity we now have (here on our own site) with a campus that is (soon to be open) for new possibilities and ministries, as well as being surrounded by (a mission field) that is as great (if not greater) than anywhere else in the world.

All of that to say, there are a lot of open-ended questions in front of us as a congregation. On the one hand, there are some exciting possibilities on the horizon; ministries that can develop and grow. On the other hand, there are some uncertain and challenging situations to be figured out. It's going to take some time. It's going to require some change. It's a time when our faith and trust (in Jesus) is being put to the test.

Now, I share these things (on the front end of this message), not in an attempt to push our thinking in one direction or another, but rather, because, in a strange sort of way, they're not too dissimilar from the situation the disciples faced not long before Jesus was to go to the cross, nor from the feelings the disciples must have had when they started to realize that things were going to change for them.

In their case, it was a hard reality, even though it hadn't (quite yet) sunk in. On several occasions, Jesus had already told them that he was going to the cross and was going to die, and that three days later he would come back to life. And now, it was soon to happen. What he had said to them (in concept and in general) was starting to (feel to them) a bit more certain and real.

In a similar way, it was a time of uncertainty for those early followers. It was a time of chapters opening and closing in ways they did not yet know. As a result, it was also a time in which their faith and their trust (in Jesus) were being put to the test.

Now, we didn't read the larger section in John's gospel. We only read a few verses from chapter 14. The larger section (chapters 14 thru 16) is often referred to as Jesus' “farewell discourse.” They're chapters in which

Jesus is saying farewell to his followers. (He's telling them goodbye.) And because he's telling them goodbye, one of the last times before his death, he's reminding them of the things he wants to make sure they remember and know.

Now, we're not going to deal with the entire section (this morning). But I'd encourage you later today or (this week) to sit down and read through what Jesus says in these three chapters. They give us a good look at what matters to our Lord. They reveal his heart. They speak of the things (in life) that count.

He talks (for example) about heaven, and about the place (in God's kingdom) that's being prepared with you in mind. He talks about the connection between love and obedience, and that if you truly love God (want your life to be used in this world) for Jesus, then you'll do what he says.

He talks about living a Christian life in an un-Christian world, and about how (if you're faithful) to what God has called you to do (and to be), that more often than not, you'll find yourself not quite fitting in. And he talks about the sadness (his followers will have) when he goes away, because he'll no longer be with them, but how it's to their benefit (and for our good) that it would happen, because he would give to them (and to us) his Holy Spirit.

"Why We Need the Holy Spirit." Let's talk for a moment about the identity of the Spirit: who the Spirit is, what the Spirit does. This is nothing new today. (We've talked about this before.) Traditionally, when we talk about the Spirit, about the persons of the Trinity, we do so in terms of their functions, what they do and carry out, rather than simply by their names.

For example, we talk about God the Father as the Creator, the one who called this world into being out of nothing. We talk about Jesus, the Son, as the Redeemer or (the Savior), the one through whom God worked to carry out his purpose and plan. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit's task is to take what Jesus has done, (the things accomplished on the cross), and make them real for us.

In other words, (when it comes to the Spirit), the work of the Holy Spirit is as important in us as the work of Christ was necessary for us. (I hope you realize that.) Without the Holy Spirit working in your life, all of what Jesus has done (on the cross and in the empty tomb) would never find its connection and application into your life.

Now, there are a number of ways to describe the work of the Spirit. In today's story, Jesus talks about the Holy Spirit as our Counselor. Other passages refer to him as our Comforter. Jesus says he's the Spirit of Truth. He's our Advocate. Most literally, he's the one (Jesus says) who is "at our side forever," watching over us, caring for us, making sure that we're never alone.

Now, why do we need to know that, that we're never alone? Because sometimes (in this world), it starts feeling as if we are. You know how that works. In times when we start questioning our faith, the questions can be overwhelming. The Spirit is there to give us counsel and to remind us that they're not – God is with us.

In times of sadness or loss, the loss and the sadness can take control. The Spirit works to comfort us and to remind us of the one who is in control of all things. In times when we're afraid, there's one who has gone before us and paved the way. (It's the same thing.) The Holy Spirit is there in all of these situations (and more), always by our side.

I start thinking about some of things facing us as a congregation and I start wondering if it's all going to work out the way we're planning and we hope. I start thinking about the things (in my own life), and I start wondering about what might happen if all of what (might happen) actually happens.

The work of the Holy Spirit (in his identity) is to remind us (in our identity) of who we are. (Don't forget that.) You are a child of God, loved and chosen eternally in Christ. We are a congregation of the Church, a body of believers for which the (Lord of the Church) was willing to give his life.

And so why should you (in your life) ever feel as if you're alone? You shouldn't. And why should we (as a congregation) ever be concerned what might happen next? We can't. The Spirit is there (in both cases) to remind us of our identity in Jesus, chosen and loved as children of God, saved and eternally secured in Christ.

"Why We Need the Holy Spirit." That's the identity of the Spirit. Let's talk about the influence of the Spirit, the way in which the Spirit works to influence our lives. Because I think we all realize that it happens, but maybe not always (as aware) of how.

I think sometimes we make it too hard. I still remember my first year in college. (I might have told you this.) It was a growing year for me. I was trying to find my way, figure out what I was planning to do. And (looking back) I know I was enjoying some newfound freedom.

I was a student at West Valley, and (for the most part) did pretty well. But there was one class I wasn't enjoying, and so because I didn't have to, (I had a little freedom), I ending up missing as many classes as I made.

Guess what happened? (I didn't flunk the class.) But I came real close. And it was a wake-up call. It was a harsh reminder. (I already knew it, but all of a sudden it was real.) Do you know what it was? It was a reminder that if you don't go to class, you're not going to learn. If you don't put in the time that's needed, you'll never end up with what you need.

The work of the Holy Spirit is like that. The Holy Spirit promises to work in your life, (to have an influence in your life). But it doesn't just happen on its own. It's not automatic, once you become a believer and join a church.

Now, I don't want to give the impression (here this morning) that the Spirit is (somehow limited) in how and where (and in what ways) it can work to what happens in the church. God isn't limited by anything. And certainly not by how he can (or can't) work. The Holy Spirit can work in countless ways in our lives.

But where has the Holy Spirit promised to work? How has the Holy Spirit committed itself to work? The Bible says that it's through God's Word that the Spirit works in your life. It's through the sacraments (of baptism and communion) that there's a promise and a commitment (from the Spirit) to help us grow. It's when you pray. It's when you spend time with God.

The disciplines of the Christian life (no matter what they are) are not there only for the spiritually elite. They're commitments we can all make and we (should all make) through which the Spirit has promised to work to transform life.

Jesus said, "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, the one whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and remind you of everything I've said."

You know, it's interesting (in this entire section) that Jesus is speaking to the disciples (not as individuals), but as a whole. And the promises he makes (of the work of the Holy Spirit) are given to them together, (given to us) as a community of faith.

It's through the church (Jesus says) that the Holy Spirit will work. It's through the family of faith (Jesus tells us) that the Holy Spirit promises to influence our lives.

Now, the promises themselves are applied individually. That's how it happens. (It's not a group blessing we receive.) No. Every child is loved by God. And so we baptize individuals. (I baptize you...) And we share the sacrament, "The body and blood of Christ given for you." There's an individual promise that becomes real (in your life) as the Spirit does his work. But not apart from the church; not outside of this body that belongs to Christ.

One of the early church fathers, named Cyprian, back in the first centuries after the church was formed, shared some powerful words about the importance of being connected to the church. He said, "We cannot honor the head (meaning Christ) if we neglect being part of his body (meaning the church)." And then he said, "He who has not the church as its Mother, can no longer have God as its Father." Now, maybe that sounds direct and harsh. (And it might be.) But it's true.

"Why We Need the Holy Spirit." (We've talked about the identity and the influence.) Before closing, just a few words about the impact the Spirit can have in your life.

Two things stand out (in these verses) about the way in which God's Spirit can impact your life. The first is by giving you the gift of peace. Jesus said, "My peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives (he said) do I give to you. And so let not your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid."

Now, when it comes to peace (and you know this as well as I do), this world is filled with the kind of peace that doesn't last. It's filled with the kind of peace that isn't really peace. Jesus gives us peace. (He promises you peace.) And he gives you peace, by giving you himself.

He said, "I'm going away. In a little while and I'll no longer be here. But I'm coming back and I will be here, (working in your life) through my Spirit, and in so doing, you will find peace.

And then he says, and here we find the (second impact) of the Spirit, (he says), "These things I have told you before they happen, so that when they do, you will believe...so that when they do, you will believe."

In other words, the work of the Holy Spirit (more than anything else) is to bring us to faith. The work of the Holy Spirit (as much as anything else) is to lead you to Christ.

That's the bottom line in the Spirit's work. The Spirit doesn't want to be front and center in your life. The Spirit's job is to point you to Jesus. The Spirit doesn't want to take (and become) the focus of your life. The Spirit's job is to connect you to Christ.

He's called the Spirit of Truth for a reason. He points you (to the one) who is the truth. He leads you to the one who can keep you in the truth. And then he reminds and counsels and comforts and guides until you come to the place (and to a peace) found only in Christ.

Let me close with this. In the mid to late-1800's, one of the most influential preachers (of his day) was a man by the name of Charles Spurgeon. Dr. Spurgeon was a Baptist preacher. He served as pastor at the New Park Street Chapel in London for 38 years. His writings and teachings were influential (in his day) and they are still having an impact today.

One of the quotes I still remember from (one of his sermons), preaching on the importance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church, without using the Spirit's name, here's what he said about the church of his day, and about why the Spirit was so desperately needed back then.

He said, (and I quote), "I believe the one reason why the church of God at this present moment has so little influence over the world is because the world has so much influence over the church...The one reason why the Church of God has so little influence over the world is because the world has so much influence over the church."

That was back in the 1800's, long before you and I came onto the scene. Do you think (his words) still apply today? Do you think the Spirit's work is still relevant for us? I think you know the answer, and so do I.

My Friends, let us never stop praying that the Spirit never stops working in leading us to Christ. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for the promise of your Holy Spirit and for the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We thank you for the identity you have given to us, for the influence the Spirit has through your Word and in this family we call the Church, as well as for the impact that the Spirit has in connecting us to Jesus.

Father, we ask for your Spirit to work in us, individually as we follow Jesus, and collectively as we work together to make his name known. Keep us centered in our faith, grounded in your Word, and securely connected to the One in whom we find our peace. In his name we pray. Amen.