

Scriptures: John 14:22-31; John 20:19-23
Sermon Title: *The Promise of the Spirit*

John 14:22-31

²²Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, ‘Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?’ ²³Jesus answered him, ‘Those who love me will keep my word, and God will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. ²⁴Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

²⁵ ‘I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom God will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. ²⁷Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. ²⁸You heard me say to you, “I am going away, and I am coming to you.” If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to God, because God is greater than I. ²⁹And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. ³⁰I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; ³¹but I do as God has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love God. Rise, let us be on our way.

John 20:19-23

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ ²²*When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’*

When I was working at the Mennonite church in Fresno, California part of my job was facilitating community programs, which included connecting with people who came to the church in need emergency assistance of some kind: help with rent, utilities, etc. One day it happened to be an older man in need of gas money to get him to a doctor's appointment – I told him I would follow him down to the corner where there was a gas station and we could help him put \$20 in the tank.

As I put the church credit card into the machine, he asked me if I like gospel music. I said that I did. And so, right there in the middle of that busy gas station, as I pumped gas into his old red Ford Explorer, this elderly gentleman started singing an old gospel song to me – as if we were the only two people there.

As I stood there listening to the gift of song this man was offering me, tears coming to my eyes, I felt a strong presence of something else there – not just the two of us, but something holy, something transcendent – you could call that feeling a lot of things, but I think I would call it *the Spirit of God*.

It didn't last long, that feeling – but it was unique. Powerful. After the song was over, and the gas pumped – we thanked one another for the gifts shared and went our separate ways. The feeling of a sense of God's Spirit didn't mean this elderly man stopped living on a fixed income that wasn't quite enough for his monthly bills, nor did it answer all my questions and doubts about God – and yet, I felt a sense of the Divine in that brief and precious interaction. *Come, Holy Spirit*.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that is not a prayer for the faint of heart, “Come, Holy Spirit.” She says that those who generally like things to stay the same – if you prefer the status quo and the boat to remain unrocked, we should not pray, “Come, Holy Spirit” because, of course, the coming of the Spirit can change everything.

This morning we conclude our series on *God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit* by turning our attention to the third, and sometimes overlooked part of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit – sometimes called the Spirit of God, or the Holy Ghost. In the theological world, the study of the Holy Spirit is called, *pneumatology*. That is kind of a fun word, *pneumatology* – but, while it might be fun to say, most of us who grew-up in a more mainline protestant church, or in an Anabaptist-Mennonite church of some kind – we likely have a pretty weak *pneumatology*, we did not grow up emphasizing the Spirit of God too much (it can be difficult to keep the unwieldy Holy Spirit into a tightly run service that doesn’t last longer than one hour).

Much of the work of the church and faith of the past few centuries has been an intellectual faith – a movement of applying the sciences to scripture and the work of the church: using business and leadership techniques to run churches and faith-based organizations; using literary and historical criticism to unpack the scriptures and better understand the settings and context; the study of languages to dig deeper into meaning and intent. These are all elements I am incredibly thankful for, they have contributed to my life of faith in countless and incredible ways – so, it is not in any way that I am against these places where faith and study/intellect have come together. But, one of the unintended consequences of this has been a weak *pneumatology*, a deemphasizing of the Spirit of God at work in our lives, at work in the world. Last week

during Adult Sunday School we were reflecting over a few weeks of study on God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit and I commented that one of the things I noticed was that when I came to early young adulthood and I began to study the Bible and theology in a formal way, God became a topic to master rather than someone with whom to have a relationship with. And I think that in some ways, many of us have had a similar experience at some point in our journeys of faith – that God became more of a concept to master intellectually, rather than someone with whom we have a relationship.

And of course, God can never be mastered by human kind – no matter how many degrees we have, no matter how many books we read, nor by how many hours we spend in silent reflection. God built us for relationship – we were built to know God. And of course, intellect is one way of knowing, but it is one way of experiencing God. But it is just one way.

So, what might beef-up our *pneumatology* a bit, what might strengthen or deepen our view of the Spirit of God?

Well, first, I have to admit that I am probably not the right one to be speaking about this as my view of the Holy Spirit has always been somewhat of an undeveloped muscle. But, I am who we have. So here are a few ways that my *pneumatology* has been developing these past years.

1) A year or so ago we did a series on *Prayer and Spiritual Practices*, and as part of one of those sermons I had us do a very basic personal inventory to help us think of our spiritual type

– the idea being that we all relate to God in different ways, that in the vastness of God, we all have parts of God that come more naturally to us. This particular inventory broke things down into 4 basic spiritual types: a more **head spirituality** (intellectual, use of words, study of theology); a more **heart spirituality** (connecting to God through song, through things that evoke emotion and feeling); a more **kingdom spirituality** (action orienting – serving, doing); and a more **mystical spirituality** (connecting to God through contemplation, awe, silence, meditation, through an absence of words). It is those of you who are more in this mystical spirituality quadrant that have much to teach the rest of us about the Holy Spirit in our midst – about how and where we might more fully on the lookout for where God’s spirit is among us, within us, and out ahead of us.

One of the great Christian mystical teachers of our time is the Catholic brother Richard Rohr. And he simply calls *mysticism, experiential knowledge of God*.¹ That helps me, a bit – that helps me relax and take a bit of the mystery out of mysticism – for we all have experiential knowledge of God in some form: knowledge that came not from books, or creeds we learned to memorize, or what others have taught us about God. But knowledge of God that we have gained from being in the mountains, from gazing at a piece of artwork that moved us, from listening to a song that stirred something deep within us, from holding a child, or sitting with someone who was dying – knowledge we have gained from hearing the story of another’s deep joy or another’s deep pain – knowledge we have gained through praying and meditating, through reading scripture, through being silent; knowledge we have gained from being serenaded with an old time gospel song as we pumped gas.

¹ From the interview with Richard Rohr on the podcast, *The Liturgists*.

So, in all these ways and more, we are all a bit mystical – God has been revealing Godself to us. And so, for me, that demystifies the unattainable mystery a bit – in all the ways you have gained an understanding of God through experience, you are a mystic.

2) A second way my understanding of the Spirit has developed took place when Jenna and I were discerning where to go after San Francisco – we had three main options: to stay in San Francisco, to go to Fresno, or to come here to Boise. And so shortly after we came here to visit Boise and secretly meet with the Hyde Park Mennonite Search Committee, we participated in an old Quaker practice, a *Clearness Committee*.

A *Clearness Committee* is a process where you sit with a few folks for discernment about a specific issue and they ask you questions for a couple of hours. And that is all, they can only ask questions – no advice, no telling you how they make decisions – only questions. And then at the end, they reflect back to you what they heard – again, not what they think they heard, not interpretation – just what they heard and what they saw. You see, the underlying principle of a *Clearness Committee* is that you already know in your soul what you want to do, or what the right path for you is. We just have to help create space to let our soul speak. And to listen when it does. Or, we might say, the Spirit of God is within us – leading us, nudging us – if we allow the Spirit to speak; if we listen when it does.

Jenna and I decided we would both reflect on our *Clearness Committee* experience for two days before we talked about it together. And two evenings later as we started to talk, it was clear to both of us, that if we were to start our lives together, it was to be Boise. And luckily, you all had the same message from the Spirit, as you discerned together.

All that to say, the Spirit is within us. But it does not demand that we listen – it does not demand our attention, nor does it demand to speak.

For example, neuro-science has shown that fearful, negative, and hateful thoughts are like Velcro – that the neurons of our mind cling to these, they wrap around and myelinate when those type of thoughts are fired. And positive, grateful, loving thoughts are like Teflon – things just slide off of them, unless – unless we pause for at least 15 seconds to appreciate and savor the experience that is producing that thought. To not just say, “oh, that is a nice sunset” and then move on, but to savor it – to give thanks to God – to dwell in that moment.² The Spirit is within us and all around us, but it does not demand our attention – it requires space, it requires attention, it requires time – not a lot of time...but at least 15 seconds to savor. To work on us. To build a bit more our experiential knowledge of God at work in and through us – in and through the world.

3) And finally, the Spirit is paradox. And I have hope in that. Or, more broadly, we might say that God is paradox. When we say one thing about God, it is likely that there is another truth of God that we are obscuring – because God is far wider and more broad than anything we could hope or imagine.

Richard Rohr says that mystical thinking is non-dual thinking. It is not ‘either-or’ thinking, it is not ‘black-and-white’ thinking, not Red/Blue, Republican/Democrat, right/wrong thinking; it is not inclusive/exclusive thinking. That as we develop our experiential knowledge of God, we move a bit out of this type of dualistic thinking, which in some ways feels like the

² These findings from neuro-science also come from the interview with Richard Rohr on *the Liturgists* podcast.

only thinking we have left in our country. While non-dual thinking might be a bit difficult to grasp, we all know that when we pause to look at the beauty of the moon, or to contemplate the work of an artist – there is nothing right or wrong, republican or democrat about those – they just are.

One of my colleagues, Meghan Good, wrote a piece a few years back that, in her view, what the larger Mennonite denomination needed to do was to worship together. This was in reference to our growing fracturedness over differing beliefs (largely around LGBTQ inclusion in the church) – her thought was that, rather than studying more or having more and more meetings in table groups with sticky notes – what we needed was to worship together. I did not quite understand this, and I thought it was a bit naïve, thinking that if we just worship together, after we are done we will be able to lay down our differences and move ahead together. But, now I wonder if this is a bit what she was hinting at – that through worship, through trying to develop a bit more our sense of mystery and the Spirit of God – that we might all move a little more out of our non-dual thinking; that we all might be moved a bit more toward the broadness and vastness of God. Not, that afterwards we would not still have differences, but that we might carry them a bit differently.

Neuro-science also shows that we cannot be angry and mystical at the same time. We cannot be angry and open to the movement of the Spirit at the same time – they are opposing and competing parts of the brain. This is not to say that there is not a place for anger – it is often anger at injustice that moves us toward action. But I think it does say that if we stay in our anger, if we don't work to process our anger, than we are closing ourselves off a bit to new experiential knowledge of God.

So, these are a few ways that my *pneumatology* has been slowly growing and changing – a few ways I am being formed and shaped by the God who is within us and out ahead of us – a few ways I am trying to release my utterly false notion that God is a concept to be mastered, and instead to try to give a bit more space to the God who is to be experienced, the Spirit who is trying to speak and lead and guide and comfort and offer love.

As we continue as a Jesus-centered people, let us also make space for the ever-present and ever-moving Spirit of God, that healing and hope might flow through us and into the world.

Amen.