

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“The Spirit in You: Paraclete”

Dr. Jay Howell

April 18, 2021

“If you love Me, you will do what I say. Then I will ask My Father and He will give you another Helper. He will be with you forever. He is the Spirit of Truth. The world cannot receive Him. It does not see Him or know Him. You know Him because He lives with you and will be in you.

“I will not leave you without help as children without parents. I will come to you. In a little while the world will see Me no more. You will see Me. Because I live, you will live also. When that day comes, you will know that I am in My Father. You will know that you are in Me. You will know that I am in you. The one who loves Me is the one who has My teaching and obeys it. My Father will love whoever loves Me. I will love him and will show Myself to him.”

The other Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, “Why is it You are going to show Yourself to us followers and not to the world?” Jesus said, “The one who loves Me will obey My teaching. My Father will love him. We will come to him and live with him. The one who does not love Me does not obey My teaching. The teaching you are now hearing is not My teaching but it is from My Father Who sent Me.

“I have told you these things while I am still with you. The Helper is the Holy Spirit. The Father will send Him in My place. He will teach you everything and help you remember everything I have told you.

“Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give peace to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.

John 14:15-27

We start a new sermon series today titled “The Spirit in You,” and as you might guess it’s all about the Holy Spirit and how he’s at work within us and through us.

I’m grateful in particular to Pastor Rachel for all the work she’s done on this series. Y’all may not know this, but over the course of the year, you bless your pastors with time to step away not just for vacation but for dedicated study—we call it Continuing Education. The work of ministry can often get into a week-to-week rhythm, and it’s not hard to become so focused on the tasks right in front of you that long term study and reflection can suffer. Not good for the pastor. Not good for the church. And so, you bless us by saying, “For a certain amount of time each year, we want you to go and study, because we know that what you study will edify our congregation.”

Well, here’s a prime example of that. One thing that Pastor Rachel has been studying over the past couple of years is a fuller understanding of the Holy Spirit. And she’s the primary architect of this sermon series exploring the power and presence of the Spirit of God at work within us, and we start by looking at the very point in the Gospel of John when Jesus tells his disciples of the one who would come to be with them forever. Let’s go to God’s Word.

[Read passage.] Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

This wasn't the first time Jesus had mentioned a Spirit or the Spirit, but it was the first time he had promised his disciples that the Spirit would come to them, and in such powerful terms. But even then, it's hard to blame the disciples for not picking up on it because what Jesus says here is confusing. I mean honestly if you had heard this for the first time, sitting at dinner—this whole exchange takes place as the Last Supper, the Passover meal shared by Christ and his disciples—if you had heard this for the first time, would it have made any sense to you? Yeah, me neither.

Jesus had told them just a little bit earlier that he wasn't going to be with them for much longer, that a time was coming when he wouldn't be by their side, and that in and of itself would have been a pretty big shocker. And then after that, honestly it can be kind of hard to track just what point he's making. There's a lot about obedience and following Jesus's commandments and then a whole lot of confusing talk about Jesus and the Father and then you and Jesus and then Jesus with the Father also with you, and in the center of it is this "Spirit" that Jesus promises, this Spirit that would be with them forever. It's kind of confusing.

So, I'm honestly grateful for Judas. Different Judas than the one you may be thinking of. But he responds to Jesus's promise to reveal himself after he was gone, as if to say, "How is *that* supposed to happen?" He's saying what I bet all of them were thinking, and he's asking the question a lot of us may still have today. We hear some promise, some description of this Spirit of God, with some vague or confusing language about all he can do, and we're thinking, "How is *that* supposed to happen?"

I mean if we're honest, how many of us really pay that much attention to the Holy Spirit? If this is jargon you're not familiar with, when Christians talk about "the Holy Spirit" or "the Holy Ghost" or "the Spirit of truth" as Jesus puts it in this passage, we're talking about the very Spirit of God, the third person of the Trinity. When we praise the Lord as one God in three persons, those three persons are God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit's inclusion in the Trinity is a big, big deal that we will get to later in this series, but today I just bring it up to emphasize for anyone for whom this might not be familiar territory that when we talk about "the Spirit," we're not just talking about what we might imagine to be, I don't know, some sort of Casper the friendly ghost. We are talking about the very presence of God Almighty.

And it feels like we don't know what to do with him. Sure, maybe some of us are familiar with the terminology, with the lingo, but do we know what to make of him? I don't. Not completely anyway. Kind of gives me the willies, to be quite honest. Because in some respects, the Spirit of God seems like a real treat, at least how he's described in Scripture, a comfort, a help, an assuring voice on your shoulder, or, say, the "fruit of the spirit" like love, joy, peace, kindness, all those things. Sign me up for that. That sounds great. But for every instance of the Spirit of God being described as this comforting presence, there's also this mysterious maybe even frightening power. For example, in the Old Testament, when the phrase "The Spirit of God came upon" someone, it didn't mean that that person suddenly felt the comforting peace of God; it typically meant they went into some kind of prophetic frenzy or deeds of power.

These days we might get the willies, especially in our particular heritage, at the mention of the Spirit, not because we don't like the Holy Spirit, but because while we tend to be more comfortable conceiving of the Holy Spirit as an assuring presence, there are other traditions within the umbrella of the Christian faith for which the Holy Spirit is absolutely central, and those expressions can appear, to those aren't accustomed to them anyway, unpredictable, disorderly, maybe even chaotic, and it makes us nervous.

And so, what has happened over the years is simply a tragic lessening or limiting of the place of the Holy Spirit in the practice and expression of faith in much of the Protestant tradition, certainly within the Presbyterian one. The former pastor and Christian writer Francis Chan wrote a whole book about this topic, and its title was *Forgotten God: Reversing Our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit*. And I think those are the right words for it: neglect, forgotten. Have we neglected the one we recognize as God, the one we worship in the same breath as God the Father and God the Son?

I think so. And “tragic” is the right word for it too, because in our neglect to worship and seek the Spirit of God, we may have missed something crucial about a life following Jesus.

I love what Caroline Morris and Colin Caruthers shared last week on Youth Sunday. If you missed their senior sermons, go back to the livestream page and listen, but they were talking about “life to the fullest” in Christ, drawing from Jesus’s words a little earlier in the Gospel of John, and they really were teeing up this series because here’s the thing: the life that Jesus invites us into is a life defined and shaped inseparably by the Holy Spirit.

Put another way, we might tend to think of our practice of faith, whether it be prayer or study or praise or fellowship or service or whatever it might be, in terms of being directed to the Father, or in obedience to Jesus, and maybe even just vaguely to God, and all that’s true, but in a life seeking the Lord, there is not a single square inch of that faith in action that is not given life, given breath, given agency by the Holy Spirit. A life in the Lord *is* a life in the Spirit, for the Spirit is God’s presence and power within us and through us now.

That’s what Jesus was promising his disciples at that supper all those years ago: one who would be with them forever, even after he was gone.

The way he first describes this Spirit is with a word that has challenged translators and scholars and preachers for centuries and that is the word “Paraclete,” or the Greek version of that anyway. Like it says in v. 16, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Paraclete, to be with you forever.” There’s really not a good way to translate that. Some Bibles have “Advocate,” others have “Comforter,” still others “Helper” or “Counselor.” None of them really capture it. But as we start this look at the Holy Spirit, we want to start with the very word Jesus first used to promise the Spirit to his disciples in the first place.

If you ever set your mind to making a boxing movie some day in the future, I’ll save you some time. You got to have a compelling main character, the Jimmy Braddock, the Rocky. You’ve got to have the big opponent: the Apollo Creed. But then you’ve got to have one more quintessential character: the trainer, the one in the corner. I’m talking about Burgess Meredith playing Rocky Balboa’s trainer Mickey. If you’ve never seen one of the, what, eight Rocky movies, Sylvester Stallone plays this boxer named Rocky Balboa, and in the first few movies, his trainer is a guy named Mickey, played by Burgess Meredith. If you’ve seen it, you know what I’m talking about. Short little guy with a gravelly growl of a voice. And Mickey was the one in Rocky’s corner when it came to the big fight.

Now this is an imperfect comparison, because half the time it seemed that Mickey would be insulting Rocky—“You’re a bum, Rocky” I think was his catchphrase—but the main thing is that Mickey was the one in Rocky’s corner giving him guidance, encouragement, direction, correction throughout the fight.

And that image, that image of a trainer in your corner is something like that word “Paraclete” meant. The word literally means “Called to one’s side,” meaning it was someone who was called to your side in times of trouble. Really its history was almost as a legal term. The Paraclete was often a term used for what we might call

now something like the family attorney, someone who knows you and your interests closely, someone called in to give you counsel, but also to speak for you, to represent you.

But the way Jesus describes it, this Spirit, this Paraclete, isn't just a one-time service, but one sent "to be with you forever." "You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you," Jesus says in v. 17. He *abides* with you. Now this is more than just a counselor. This is where our neglect of seeking the Holy Spirit really is tragic, because what Jesus is sharing here is truly good news. The Spirit *abides* with you, he says. Now that's a word we don't use too much. When I hear it, I think of the Dude in *The Big Lebowski*. If you don't know the reference, the Dude is this character who just drifts along and is just kind of there, "takin' it easy," and he sums it all up by saying about himself, "The Dude abides." And it's almost funny in that context.

But when Jesus says it here, the notion of God abiding *anywhere* was a huge deal. This stems back to God's promises to Israel, promising to dwell, to abide with them as they went through the desert, to abide with them as they came to Jerusalem, to abide with them when they built the Temple. But that's how they understood it. God *abided* with them in the Temple. That was God's home. Now, though, Jesus is saying that this Spirit would *abide* with them. Then, he doubles down on what that means, in v. 23, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." The meaning is crucial: that when the Spirit comes to be with us, he isn't a guardian angel; he isn't a calming presence; he is none other than the very presence of the Living God, the very presence of Christ himself "making a home" with you. It's not just about substituting for Jesus; the Spirit *is* Jesus's presence with his followers. A relationship with Jesus or a relationship with God? That's the Spirit at work. The Father making a home in you.

What could be more important? Especially for disciples going into a world that wouldn't know or see the Lord. It's a strange world they go into, a downright hostile world they go into, a world filled with uncertainty and anxiety, and they would not be alone as they go into it.

And neither are we. Friends, is the world we go into all that different? A world at times strange, other times hostile, filled with uncertainty and anxiety. I mean, just in the past month, it seems it's just been a string of headlines about shootings, with the one in Indianapolis only the most recent. With the pandemic still ongoing, though mercifully it seems coming to an end, some folks may think, "Let's get back to normal now, what are we waiting for?" while others think, "Do we want to end up like Michigan? It's still way too soon," and at every turn it seems anxiety rears its ugly head.

But it's into *that* world that the Spirit, the very presence of the Living God, of Christ himself, says to us, "I will be with you. I am making a home with you. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

This is the promise of our God, a promise not to abandon us, a promise not to leave us in the lurch, and if you ever need to see evidence of it, look to those who also seek to love and follow the Lord, for in that love and faithfulness, the faithfulness of God shines through.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.