

## The Holy Spirit Is

### The Apostle's Creed, Part 4

*“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints...”*

In the past three weeks we have professed our belief in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord. Now we profess our belief in the Holy Spirit. This completes the Christian profession of faith in the Trinity, or Triune God. We believe that God is three-in-one and one-in-three. We believe in only one true God, but manifested in three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – yet always remaining as one Divine Being.

Here are a few traditional analogies to try and explain the Triune God. One way is to think of water. It has three states – steam, water, and ice. Regardless of which state it is in, it is always of the same substance. Another analogy is an equilateral triangle, with three sides. Remove any one side and you no longer have a triangle. Yet another way is to think of an egg with its three components of shell, yolk, and white. It takes all three to make the egg an egg.

Here is an analogy of my own construct. Think of yourself. You live out your life in many roles, yet you are always the same person. When you leave for work, something of you still stays with your children. You think about them and they think about you. While at work you are in a different role, but still acting out in your parental role. So it is with all your other roles. So it is with God.

The Holy Spirit is not just a New Testament phenomenon. In the very opening of the Bible in Genesis 1:1-2 it says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the *Spirit* of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” [Emphasis added]. That’s from the New King James Bible. Our pew Bible, which is the New Revised Standard Version, reads at verse 2, “...a *wind* from God swept over the face of the waters.” [Emphasis added]. The Hebrew word here is *ruach*, which translates as Spirit, or wind, or breath.

The testimony to the Holy Spirit continues in the New Testament. The dove, representing the Spirit, descended upon Jesus at his baptism. Jesus told his disciples in John 14:16-17, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the *Spirit* of truth.” [Emphasis added].

The Greek word that is translated as Advocate is *Paraclete*. It also translates as Helper, or Comforter, or Counselor. The Holy Spirit is all of those things. The Spirit is God with us and leading us to guide and nurture us. It is the Spirit who teaches us, who calls us into fellowship with God and the Christian family, and into stewardship of sharing who we are and what we have with others. It is the Spirit that leads us into sanctification, or the perfection of our Christian walk, and thus into service on behalf of others. All of us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, are given gifts to be used in ministry for God. From there it is the Spirit who leads us into salvation.

The next phrase in the Creed is “the holy catholic church.” It is not referring to the Roman Catholic Church. The word catholic in the Creed is spelled with a lower case “c”, and it literally means “universal” as the double asterisk in the Creed identifies. For a little over 1,000 years after Jesus’ ascension, there was only one Christian Church, which spanned from Rome in the west to Constantinople in the east. Because the church was widespread it was referred to as being universal. In 1054 the Eastern Orthodox Church broke from the western church, partly because they refused to acknowledge the preeminence of the Pope. The western church, in something of a jab at the Orthodox Church, named itself the Roman Catholic Church, trying to indicate that it was still the universal church.

What this phrase really means is that we believe in the universal church of Jesus Christ. Although we are United Methodists, we understand that Christ and his church transcend denominations, that Christ is head of his Holy Church. That is why we accept a person’s baptism, regardless of the church that

administered it, with the exception of the Mormon Church, which does not baptize in the name of the Trinity. Because of the universality of Christ, we United Methodists serve Holy Communion at an open table. God's sacraments belong to the universal church and not just one expression of it.

Next in the Creed is the phrase "the communion of saints." It embodies a sense of the network of believers around the world, a community that reaches beyond all social and political boundaries to embrace all followers of our Lord Jesus Christ. The New Testament refers to that community numerous times. Hebrews 12:1 says we are surrounded by a "cloud of witnesses", the faithful of all ages. That cloud of witnesses encompasses those alive and around us today, as well as those who have died in the faith, all of whom we believe sustain us on our journeys of life and faith. Through God we are related to all the saints who ever lived.

The "communion of saints" implies something bigger than ourselves from which we can draw strength and inspiration. It means we are all part of God and that we are never alone. We need to learn to trust the community of saints to be in communion with us. How many times have you heard someone say, or you have said, "I never would have made it if it weren't for so-and-so reaching out to me?" Or, "I knew my church family was praying for me, and I felt their strength as it sustained me in my time of great need." Or, have you ever thought of someone dear to you who has gone to be with God, and just thinking of them at a difficult time gave you the courage and will to continue on? All of these reflect the communion of saints.

I want to return to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is God guiding, nudging, speaking, whispering to us. When we have the sudden thought to call someone or do something specific, it is the Holy Spirit. And being the Holy Spirit, then we need to pay attention. I don't believe in coincidences. If you think that something was really just a coincidence, then I would counter that was was a moment when God chose to be anonymous. Here's a true story that illustrates how the Spirit works with people –

In New York City, it seems there is a Starbucks on every block. But there is one particular Starbucks at the corner of 51<sup>st</sup> Street and Broadway near Times Square that is more popular than most. One of the reasons is that it allows local musicians to play inside. On a chilly November day, the coffee shop was packed. In a corner a duo was playing and singing pop tunes from the 50s through the 90s.

A woman was sitting near the duo with her latte, gently swaying to the music, and was clearly feeling the rhythm and words being sung. Half-way through one particular song, she began to gently sing along. After the song ended she apologized to the musicians. One of them said they enjoy it when audience members join in, especially when they have as a beautiful voice as she did. They asked her if she would like to stand in with them and sing the next number. She agreed. They asked her what she might like to sing. She asked if they knew any hymns and they said of course. She said she had too many favorites to choose from, so she'd let them pick. They thought for a moment and one of them said, "Okay, how about *His Eye Is on the Sparrow*?" She looked at him and quietly said, "Yes, let's do that one. That will be good."

The woman stepped up onto the small platform that served as a stage. The duo gave her a two-bar set-up, and then she began to sing, "Why should I be discouraged? Why should the shadows come?" The moment she began singing, everyone in Starbucks fell silent and watched her. The song rose to its conclusion, "I sing because I'm happy; I sing because I'm free. For his eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me." As she finished, a roar of appreciation and applause erupted from the patrons.

The woman, a little embarrassed, stepped down. One of the musicians gave her a hug and told her she had a gorgeous voice and had provided everyone with a memorable moment. She thanked him and said, "It's a little odd that you picked that particular hymn." "Why is that?" he asked. "Well," she replied, "it was my daughter's favorite hymn." Tears welled up in her eyes as she added, "She was sixteen. She died of a brain tumor last month." The man was stunned and the only thing he could think to say was, "Are you going to be okay?" She looked at him and said, "Yes, I am going to be all right." They hugged again and she left Starbucks, again to the sound of applause.

Great story, don't you think? But this is what's really important. Was it a coincidence that the two musicians came to that Starbucks on that particular day to play and sing? Was it a coincidence that the woman chose that day to enter the coffee shop? Was it a coincidence that of all the hymns the duo could have chosen, they picked the woman's daughter's favorite, the daughter who had just died? No, none of these were coincidences. The Holy Spirit has been arranging encounters in human history since the beginning of our existence. There isn't any reason to not believe that the Spirit reached into a coffee shop in Manhattan and turned an ordinary day with a little background music into a revival that touched several dozen lives.

The story is simply a reminder that if we keep trusting our Lord and singing his songs, everything's going to be okay. And that is the movement and power of the Holy Spirit. "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints." Thanks be God. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 3 April 2011