

“Wholly? Holey? Holy? Spirit”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 51:10-17 New Testament Lesson – Romans 8:14-17

Irving Stone in his book “The Agony and the Ecstasy,”¹ says that for the famous sculptor Michelangelo, his “first lesson had been that the power and the durability lay in the stone, not in the arms or tools.

If ever a mason came to think he was master, the stone would oppose and thwart him. And if a mason beat his stone as an ignorant (peasant) might beat his beasts, the rich, warm, glowing, breathing material (that is the stone) became dull, colorless, ugly; died under his hand....”

We can think of our soul or spirit as the rock of our foundation, and God as the master sculptor forming it within us to reveal our rich, warm, glowing selves. Our challenge is, who do we let form us – a master sculptor like God, or some brut of a stoneworker pounding us down to nothing?

When we let the world have its way with us, we are turning ourselves over to an unskilled, ham-handed stoneworker. That’s the temptation – for us now, as it was for the early Christians in Rome at the time of Paul. Paul is concerned that these early followers of Christ are missing out on the Spirit of God. That’s why he has to remind them what kind of spirit they’ve been given, saying, “All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.” Paul has to remind them that they received a spirit of adoption – not one of slavery and fear – because they were rejecting the true Spirit of God, in how they lived their lives.

The Christians in Rome were trying to distance themselves from the Jewish community. They didn’t want to suffer alongside the Jews under the Empire’s anti-Jewish practices, which included being sold into slavery. That was their struggle; they feared for their very survival, and if that led them to turn their backs on others, so be it.

¹ Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961.

Our struggle is similar. Our struggle is to not to turn our backs on God, to not distance ourselves from God just because it is hard to be a Christian in today's world.

Our struggle is to have trust in God rather than fear of the world, fear for our very survival, which we are all prone to – sometimes financially, sometimes bodily or emotionally, but seldom spiritually.

Seldom do we worry so much about our spirit as we charge forward in some blind headlong quest for earthly comfort and certainty. Our financial, physical and relationship struggles are so in-our-face all the time that it's easy for us to see only them, and to forget that we are spiritual beings, children of God. So we need help to remember who we are, whose we are.

"When we cry, 'Abba! Father!,'" writes Paul, "it is that very Spirit the spirit of God bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God..." And when we cry something other than 'Abba! Father!' – because life is dealing us dirt and we've forgotten where to turn – when we cry out to substances to make us happy, or our bank accounts to make us secure, or our busy lives to make us feel valued – it's not the Spirit of God speaking through us.

When we turn to worldly things for happiness, security, and love, we are always let down. But turning to God lifts us up. The Spirit of God speaks through us – "bears witness," as Paul says, "with our spirit," and in doing so, God shapes who we are, God reveals to the world that which we so often to see or be, the beautiful creation that is us.

One day a 5-year-old boy was walking to grandma's house after attending Sunday school. The lesson for the day had been Jesus' teaching about doing unto other, about "doing it for the least of these." And he couldn't get it out of his head how the teacher said, "When you give something to another person, you're really giving it to Jesus."

Walking through a park, the boy noticed an elderly woman sitting on a bench. She looked lost and lonely, so he went over to her, sat down, and took from his pocket a package of M&M's. He offered her some. She smiled and took them.

The boy liked her smile so much that he gave her some more M&M's. This time they exchanged smiles and, for a while, they sat together in silence, just smiling at each other.

Finally, the boy got up to leave. But as he began to walk away, he turned, ran back to the bench, and gave the woman a big hug. She gave him her very best smile.

When the boy arrived at his grandmother's house, she saw a big smile on his face and asked, "What made you so happy?"

He said, "I shared my M&M's with Jesus. And she has a great smile."

Meanwhile, the woman on the bench returned to her little apartment, where she lived with her sister. "You're all smiles," said the sister. "What made you so happy today?" She replied, "I was sitting in the park, eating M&M's with Jesus. And you know, he looks a lot younger than I expected." God – revealing to the world the beautiful creation that is us, when we follow the Spirit's leading.

So how do we keep from hiding behind worldly concerns and allow our true selves to shine through? Well, it depends on what type of spirit we embrace – is it a Wholly spirit (w-h-o-l-l-y) as in "whole" or "complete" or "universal?" Or do we settle for a Holey spirit (h-o-l-e-y), a spirit full of holes?

Or do we embrace what God actually gives to us, the Holy Spirit (h - o - l - y) as in sacred, a part of us, given directly from God? It makes a difference which holy you choose to embrace in life – you can see all three spellings in the bulletin sermon title: whole or wholly as in universal, holey as in full of holes, or holy as in sacred.

Think about it, which holy do you relate to most often in life?

There's not necessarily a right and a wrong answer, because all three can lead us toward God if we approach life faithfully.

If we view the Spirit of God as whole, complete and universal, that means we see and acknowledge God's presence everywhere. Which means – if we're really opening ourselves to the leading of the Spirit – God can be in everything we say and do. God can shine throughout our whole lives; our whole world.

Unfortunately, of course, this is not always the case. Too often we treat God as if the Holy Spirit is less than complete and universal; we treat the Holy Spirit as if it were full of holes, when really, we are the ones who have holes in our lives.

When we pick and choose where and when it's OK to have God be a part of our lives, we are creating holes. "I have to be good at church or school, but at home I can let things slip." Or, "I can't act on my Christian values in the real world – I'd be eaten alive." Or, "I keep it together all week long, but on the weekends, watch out – that's when I get to let loose."

God doesn't want to lose any part of us, so God sent the Holy Spirit upon us, to make us whole, wherever we are, whatever we're doing, and even in the face of whatever we're struggling with.

People with holes in their lives only feel and know and appreciate God when things are good. While people who are made whole by God-and-God-alone can face any trouble without ever feeling completely lost or abandoned or unappreciated; Because they know God is there to plug those holes in their lives.

In last Wednesday's episode of the TV show Chicago Fire, Chief Boden was having a bad day – he had to tell a woman her fiancé didn't make it through a terrible accident, and one of his best men was facing charges of sexual abuse.

Then another firefighter comes into Boden's office and says they've got a 12-year-old birthday girl out in the firehouse getting pictures taken beside the fire truck. Boden is in no mode for it, but the firefighter says he ought to come out, saying, "This one's important, Chief."

As Boden approaches the little girl and her parents (obviously her adoptive parents, since, like Boden, the little girl is African American and the parents are Caucasian), as he's approaching her, I'm thinking, "Oh no, is this his child, from some extramarital affair!?!"

So there's Boden, standing in front of her, and the little girl says, "Do you recognize me." "Umm,,," I'm sorry, no I don't," says Boden. So she says, "Twelve years ago today I was left on the doorstep of this firehouse; he said you were the fireman who found me. I was adopted; I live in Indiana now.... Thank you." "No," says Boden, "thank you, Charlotte. Because you have made this chief a very happy man today."

It was a Holy Spirit moment – God moving into a situation and filling the holes in the lives of two people, by bring them together at just the right time, in just the right place. It's OK to have holes in our lives, as long as we wait on God to fill those holes, and to make us whole.

What is it that causes us to turn outward for our sense of happiness, security, and love; those things that God so desperately wants to give us in our inner being? The Apostle Paul hits on it in his letter, where he says, "You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but ... a spirit of adoption."

Slavery and adoption – both point to one's identity, how someone sees him- or herself. Slaves are controlled and restrained, while someone who is adopted is given a secure home and encouraged to go forth in the strength and courage of unconditional love and acceptance.

That's what God has for us – unconditional love and acceptance. It's a holy, sacred love that God rains down upon us through the power of the Spirit of God, the Spirit that descended upon us in order to give rise to the church.

The Holy Spirit is faithful, all-powerful, and worthy of our respect and patience and confidence. When we feel there are holes in our lives or in our church, we need only wait on God to fill those holes, and to make us whole, through our faithful ministry to one another.

When we can't sense God's presence or even if we sometimes doubt that God even exists, we need only trust that God's spirit is at work in us, as individuals and as a church just waiting to break through, to be known, and to be seen, and to be celebrated.

God doesn't want us to be full of holes, but rather to be made whole through presence and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Wholly, holey, or holy – what kind of spirit is it that you embrace, what spirit is it that carries you forth today? And will you – will I- allow God's spirit to guide us forward? Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Almighty God, We gather together at this time and place – members and friends of First Presbyterian Church – with all the apparent differences that human beings could possibly reflect. Man and woman, various skin tones and ethnic backgrounds, tall and short, all sorts of sizes and shapes, all different types of personalities.

But we gather together to celebrate our likeness in Christ, as we affirm our differences in culture. We celebrate that we are all God's children, all brothers and sisters in your image.

We also gather together for another reason. To form a new family, a family committed to giving new meaning and purpose to the principles of Peace, Love and Justice.

A spiritual family committed to overcoming the opposing forces of Hate, Destruction and Injustice.

In other words, a Pentecost Family, committed to bringing about the reality of the kingdom of God on Earth.

In your name, Spirit of the Living God, we pray to be given the strength to make this day the most Spirit-led day of our lives, and to embrace all days hereafter as if they were full of the Holy Spirit, which they are.

Thank you, Lord, for sending the Holy Spirit to dwell among us and to work in us and through us. Thank you for sending us an example of a spirit-led life in the person of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, to whom you gave and from whom we received the words we are about to pray, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.