

Sermon – 11th Pentecost
Isaiah 63:7-14 & John 14:15-27
August 5, 2018

“What Do We Mean by ‘Person?’ – How the Holy Spirit Does God”

Anybody up for some “*pneumatology* today?” That’s “nooma” with a ‘p’ as in “pneumonia” and for those unfortunate enough to have had it you know that it has a lot to do with air and breath! Pneumatology is the high and mighty phrase theologians ascribe to study of the Holy Spirit. It derives from the Greek word for “spirit” in the New Testament – you guessed it - “nooma” with a ‘p’ which also could mean “*breath or wind*.”

The Holy Spirit is the “third person” of the Trinity. The ascription of the word “person” to describe God was first made in the 2nd century by a man name Tertullian – he used a Latin term “*persona*”, literally “mask” of the sort used by actors in theaters to indicate the parts they were playing. It’s a bit problematic thinking of God as “acting” like our kids in VBS did this week in their skits, but Tertullian was convinced humans know God not simply intellectually but by way of a relationship – so he used a term that conveyed the relationships acted out on a stage. He concluded that just as God is in relationship with us, God is in relationship with himself – Trinity, one God in three persons.

That relationship within the Trinity is stated in the Nicene Creed. Unlike the shorter Apostle’s Creed, the Nicene emphasized the relationship of the Spirit to God the Father and Jesus the Son by saying the Spirit “*proceeds*” from them. Words struggle mightily to convey the unspeakable however, so a Russian artist named Andrei Rublev took a crack at it and created a painting of the Trinity in the 15th century, depicting them as equal in appearance and stature, but with the figures on the right and the center, representing the Spirit and the Son nodding toward the figure to the left, the Father. And he pictures them conversing.

How does the Bible describe the Holy Spirit? Genesis 1:2 says “*In the beginning a wind from God*”, in some versions “*the spirit of God*” hovered over the waters and creation was brought forth. Matthew 3:16 says “*When Jesus had been baptized...he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descending on him like a dove*”. On the basis of just these two references to “spirit” it’s easy to see why the Holy Spirit in spite of creeds and paintings may be the most difficult to conceive of as a person or “personal”. When we say “person” in the English language we think of an individual human being with their own personality and will.

We may find it easier to think of God the Father or Creator as “person” because Genesis 1:26-27 tells us we are made “*in the image of God*.” It’s real easy to think of Jesus the Son as person because he was one, and his personality and will are recorded for us in the gospels. But God the Spirit is largely thought of as some mysterious “presence” – even a scary one for those of you raised to confess your faith in “the Holy Ghost.”

“*What then does the Bible say about the Holy Spirit*” and “*what important role does the Holy Spirit play in my life?*” We’ll address the latter question through Luther’s Small Catechism and his explanation of the 3rd Article of the Apostle’s Creed which has but one simple statement to make...“I believe in the Holy Spirit.”

Luther emphasized the work rather than the “person” of the Spirit, by saying he “*calls us to faith*”, a faith we couldn’t obtain by ourselves, “*gathers the church*”, through the gospel, and “*sanctifies*” us – showing us how to live a life reflective of our faith.

To the former question then, our lessons from Isaiah 63 and John 14 are illustrative, but by no means exhaustive of what the Bible says about the Holy Spirit. I chose them because, as Tertullian discovered – they reveal God in relationship with people. When we think of “person”, in our culture at least we emphasize “individuality.” Recall Tertullian understood “person” through the Latin “persona” and actors who were in relation to other actors. Person to him was someone in web of relationships. What they said and did depended on what other actors said and did.

Isaiah 63 says that Israel “knew God” as compassionate and who’d “*done many good things for them.*” When Israel was distressed, so was God, as though God could vicariously feel what it was like to be a slave in Egypt – beaten, starved and worked mercilessly. God could also be grieved which you can’t do if you haven’t first loved. God reacted to what Israel did. When Israel rejected God, He became like an enemy to them. Relationships are complex aren’t they?

In John 14, the key word is one easily overlooked – “another.” In verse 16 Jesus says he will send “another” Counselor. The Spirit of Truth would be to the believers precisely what Jesus was to them – a preacher, a teacher, a forgiver, a comforter, and a friend among many other things. The Spirit is unique, but also the same as the Father who sent Jesus and the Son who gave the Spirit. “*I will not leave you as orphans, I will come to you.*” Jesus never left – he changed his appearance. Now he looks a lot like the ‘persons’ he came to save!

What does the Bible say about the Holy Spirit? Isaiah 7:14 says that to a young woman a child would be born – Immanuel, which means “*God with us.*” John 14:16 says Jesus gave “another counselor” to be ‘*with us*’ forever. But the best witness is and has to be what the Spirit says. Close your eyes as the Spirit addresses you personally. “*Peace I leave **with you**, my peace I give **you**...Do not let **your** hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid.*” AMEN