

“The Holy Spirit Loves You”
Rev. Bill Freeman
Sunday, June 4, 2017
Menifee United Church of Christ

A minister likes a drink every now and then. His favorite drink is peach brandy. Every year on his birthday, one of his parishioners would give him a bottle of peach brandy. This year on his birthday, the parishioner said, “You have to, this Sunday, thank me for my gift from the pulpit.” Well, the minister was reluctant to do that, he didn’t want to let the congregation know of his drinking habits, but he reluctantly agreed to do it. So, he stood in the pulpit on Sunday and said, “First, I have an announcement to make. I want to thank Joe for buying me some peaches. And I also want to thank him for the spirit in which they were given.”

Ah, the Spirit! Yes, sometimes the spirit can mean drink, booze, alcohol, liquor. Some people enjoy having a drink every now and then, a bit of the spirit. Some people are happy when they drink. They’re a happy drunk. Some people are mean when they drink. They’re a mean drunk. But, except for alcoholics, it seems to me, as they say, that everything in moderation is good.

But what is the spirit in regards to religion? Well, the Spirit, called the Holy Spirit, is also sometimes filling to people. They get animated sometimes, they wave their hands in the air like they just don’t care. Sometimes when people are filled with the Spirit, they speak in tongues. Usually not in this church, but in Pentecostal churches. Then, there are other people in Pentecostal churches who interpret what the Spirit says to them. I’ve heard ministers on TV speaking in tongues and seen it elsewhere. Maybe you have, too, people filled with the Spirit.

A couple thousand years ago, the Spirit came upon the disciples and others as well. It was Pentecost. Today is Pentecost. All of a sudden, the rush of a wind, a heavenly wind, came into the house where the disciples and others were, and the disciples were filled with the Spirit and began, seemingly, to speak in tongues. They spoke in their own language, whether it was Aramaic or Hebrew or Greek, but people heard what they said in their own language. It would be as if somebody spoke in English and somebody who spoke French heard what somebody said in English, but heard it in French. Somebody who spoke German heard the English-spoken words, but in German. Or somebody maybe spoke Italian heard the English-spoken words, but heard them in Italian. It’s as if they had earphones on and they had interpreters interpreting what the language was. We don’t know exactly what was said, but the disciples were probably prophesying, saying what was going to come.

Some people who weren’t filled with the Spirit, who were unbelievers, said, “Oh, they’re just drunk.” But Peter stood up and said, “No, they’re not drunk. They’re just filled with the Spirit. It’s only 9:00 in the morning.” They weren’t drunk. They were filled with the Spirit and some could prophesy. Men, women. Some could see visions and some could dream dreams. This was predicted by the prophets of old, that this would happen. Another word for spirit is “wind” and “breath.” In Greek and Hebrew, the word for spirit means breath, so it’s the heavenly wind that blew to that house.

Now, some people say that Pentecost was the beginning of the Christian church. I think the Christian church began 40 days before that, not counting Sundays, when women came upon the empty tomb and ran to where the disciples were and said, “He is risen!” They were the first evangelists, I guess you could say. But I also wonder if the Christian church began the first time Jesus began teaching, the first time Jesus said, “Love your neighbor.” The first time Jesus said, “Love your enemies. Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Welcome the stranger.” I think maybe we could say that was the beginning of the Christian church.

All I know is, the Spirit loves you. The Spirit loves you because the Spirit is love. And God is love. And Jesus is love. So the Spirit, being part of the Holy Trinity, would also be love. We sing, “Jesus loves me, this I know.” We don’t sing, “God loves me, this I know,” but we believe God loves us, too. Therefore, it seems to me, the Spirit also loves us. We are filled with the Spirit ourselves because we are made in the image of God, and Jesus said that God is spirit and those that worship God must worship in spirit and in truth. So, if God is spirit, we are also spirit.

But don’t take my word for it. Take the word of a Jesuit priest, theologian, and philosopher from the first half of the twentieth century, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, (I love saying that name!) who said, “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a human experience.” That is so true! We are spiritual beings! Our body is just here to carry our spirits around. I heard a philosopher say our bodies are here to carry our brain around, and that’s true, too. Our bodies are here to carry our spirit around.

We are spiritual beings and we are filled with the Spirit. God created humankind. God breathed life into us – the breath of the Spirit. When Jesus, in another part of the Scriptures, came upon the disciples after he was raised, he breathed on them and gave them the Spirit. So, we are filled with the Spirit. We are spiritual beings.

Sometimes, though, we forget about the Holy Spirit. It's part of the Holy Trinity, but sometimes we don't pay as much attention to the Spirit as we do to God and as we do to Jesus. In fact, in seminary, I once preached a sermon entitled, "The Holy Trinity or the Divine Duo?" because it seems to me we don't always pay attention to the Spirit. We know about God, we know about Jesus, but we don't really know about the Holy Spirit. One of my professors said to me afterwards. "Well, that's because we can't put the Holy Spirit in a box." We can't contain the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit blows where it will. We don't know, really, how to describe the Spirit.

How do we describe the Spirit? Jesus said God is spirit, but we sometimes describe God as a white-bearded man sitting on a cloud in heaven someplace. People can picture that. It's not true, but it's something we can picture – like God is Santa Claus on a cloud in heaven or something. And we can picture Jesus. There are pictures of Jesus all over the place. I've got a picture of him in my office. There are pictures of Jesus and the disciples at the Last Supper. We can picture Jesus and a lot of times Hollywood movies depict Jesus as a blue-eyed blonde, but that can't be true either, given the fact that Jesus was Jewish. As I sometimes say, Jesus probably looked less like Mel Gibson and more like Mel Brooks. So, we sometimes forget about the Spirit, but I think we need to remember the Spirit. The Spirit is part of the Holy Trinity. The Spirit blows where it will.

Jamie Lee Sprague-Ballou is perhaps the newest minister in the United Church of Christ. I went to her ordination last weekend in Las Vegas. (And I didn't gamble!) It was a wonderful service, made even more wonderful by the fact that Jamie Lee Sprague-Ballou is transgender. She is the first transgender minister to be ordained in the United Church of Christ. It was wonderful to be seeing history being made, laying hands on Jamie Lee with dozens of others as she was being ordained and installed as a minister of a church in Las Vegas.

The United Church of Christ, the denomination that we're a part of, has many firsts. The UCC was the first mainline Christian denomination, although it was called by a different name many years ago, but it was the first mainline Christian denomination to ordain an African American. The UCC was the first mainline Christian denomination to ordain a woman. The UCC was the first mainline Christian denomination to ordain an openly gay person. And now the UCC is the first mainline Christian denomination to ordain a transgender person. I think that is fantastic! I think it's a blessing for our church. I mean, some churches don't even ordain women. Some churches don't even ordain gay people and the UCC ordains them and now, a transgender person, the first of, I'm sure, many who will be ordained by the UCC. It's something we can be proud of and it demonstrates that we can't put limits on the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is boundless. The Holy Spirit blows where it will. The Scripture might say something about homosexuals, but the Holy Spirit can call homosexuals to the ministry. The Scripture might say that women should be silent in churches, but the Holy Spirit can call women to the ministry. The Holy Spirit cannot be bound. You can't put boundaries on the Holy Spirit. You can't put limits on the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit wants to call a transgender person, like Jamie, the Holy Spirit can do that. If the Holy Spirit wants to call an African American to the ministry, the Holy Spirit will do that. The Holy Spirit has no limits. Thank God!

We are part of that Holy Spirit. We are one in the Spirit. In fact, there's a song that says just that. We sing it sometimes. The song is "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love." It goes something like, "We are one in the Spirit. We are one in the Lord. We are one in the Spirit. We are one in the Lord. And we pray that all unity will one day be restored. And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love."

The Holy Spirit is one. Just like the earth is one. There might be divisions on the earth, called countries, artificial, human-made divisions, but when you see the earth from space, the earth is just one. There aren't different colored countries like a Rand McNally map. The earth is one. And the Holy Spirit is one. There might be artificial boundaries called religions, but the Spirit is one. I pray for the day when we will be one in the Spirit – Christians and Jews, Buddhists and Hindus, Muslims and everyone – one in the Spirit because the Holy Spirit is one. The Holy Spirit is not divided by religions any more than the earth is divided by countries. The Holy Spirit is one.

What are your thoughts about the Holy Spirit? Do you sometimes feel filled by the Holy Spirit? Do you sometimes feel like throwing your hands in the air like you just don't care? Do you sometimes feel touched by the Holy Spirit, feel the Holy Spirit talking to you inside? Or maybe, because the word "spirit" also means "wind," do you sometimes hear the Spirit blowing in the wind, whispering to you in the wind? Some people won't admit that, because we're not supposed to hear voices, but if we hear the Spirit, we know it. The Spirit tells us to do good.

When we are filled with the Spirit, what are we supposed to do? It doesn't really say in our Scripture what the disciples said when they were touched by the Spirit, but what are we supposed to do if we are filled with the Spirit? I think we are supposed to share the love of God, follow the teachings of Jesus. I think we are supposed to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and welcome the stranger and visit the prisoner and care for the sick and do justice, love kindness and walk humbly. That's what I believe we're supposed to do when we're filled with the Spirit. Maybe after we do that, we can reward ourselves with a nice glass of peach brandy. Or the spirit of your choice.

Let us pray:
God of love,
Help us to be filled with the Spirit.
Help us to help others to be filled with the Spirit.
And help us to do your will when we are filled with the Spirit.
Now and forevermore,
By the power of the Holy Spirit.
And in the name of Jesus.
Amen.

*(This sermon was delivered without manuscript or notes
and was transcribed from a recording of it.)*