

Romans 8:18-27
August 14, 2011

South Plains

I Believe In the Holy Ghost

I want to make a change. It may not last longer than today, if that long, but let's try it anyway. I want to change the Apostles Creed from saying "I believe in the Holy Ghost" to say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit." That might seem simple. But considering that we have spoken words such as "sitteth" and "quith" in the creed for centuries without blinking an eye, this change may not work. Maybe everyone knows the Holy Ghost and the Holy Spirit are one and the same. This sermon is an attempt first to justify my little revolution; and second, to make more sense of the third person of the Trinity.

In my mind, believing in a ghost is playful, even childlike. Believing in a spirit on the other hand may be a mark of openness. Believing, trusting in the Holy Spirit signifies a step in Christian maturity. In either case, however, describing a ghost or a spirit is admittedly a little vague. It's hard to pin down and put into words. And yet, we Christians affirm the third person of the Trinity. Sunday after Sunday we begin the final paragraph of the Creed with the words, "I believe in the Holy Ghost." The Spirit of God (we never say 'the Ghost of God') appears in the first chapter of Genesis, brooding over the waters as the wind or spirit of God; and, it's there in the last chapter of Revelation speaking to the

church. We need to get a handle on the Holy Spirit, if we aren't well acquainted already.

The eighth chapter of the letter to the Romans is a good place to start. In that letter, Paul compares the suffering of the world to a woman in labor. As an outside observer of childbirth, but as one heavily invested in the process, I know labor pangs are serious business. Giving birth mixes pain and joy and uncertainty into a volatile explosion of new life. Often the occasion produces well-founded fear. So much of our hope for the future, more than prospective parents may know at the time, so much depends on that awful struggle to bring life into the world. Paul says the whole "creation waits with eager longing ...groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves (8:19, 22-23)." In other words, creation isn't over. Thank goodness the world's not finished. God is still working to bring algae and apes; sun, moon and stars; Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews to the perfection God envisioned at the very beginning of time.

Think of the questions that our world is groaning about today: Can Afghanistan give birth to a stable, healthy government? When that war was conceived, the initial excitement of the action raised our hopes; but the ten year gestation period for a new government in Afghanistan has been fraught. Will the economic recovery in the United States be stillborn? And, what kind of world will our economy live in? Closer to home, our Presbyterian denomination has birthed a new Book of

Order, leaner and more like a constitution than a law book. Many churches are groaning with the pain of membership losses, caught in fear about the future while others are groaning with a mixture of joy and uncertainty. It's not only Presbyterian Christians who suffer from a changing environment. What is certain is that the new church aborning in the twenty-first century is an unknown quantity. On a more personal level, anxieties, losses and pains have visited the homes of our friends. Paul says, we "groan inwardly." There's a lot of groaning going around these days.

Paul interprets those sighs of anxiety and pain as calls for the Holy Spirit. This is an environment in which the Spirit works as the go-between-God, the semi-permeable membrane separating human creatures from the divine Creator, a thin crossing that allows communication to flow, sometimes to us, sometimes to God. That's the reality of the Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus is both human and God, the Holy Spirit also straddles the divide between us and God.

I finally got to read *The Poisonwood Bible* on vacation. Barbara Kingsolver's novel tells the story of a misguided missionary to Africa. The missionary attempts to convert the Africans with absolutely no appreciation for the cultural and language differences. His single smart move is to hire a bright, young African named Anatole to translate his sermons from English to the local dialect. The sermons would be funny except that his arrogance wastes any opportunity to help his congregation

spiritually or any other way. Providentially, Anatole is able to avoid some of the damage. When the words of the sermon would be insulting and hostile to the Africans, Anatole simply changes the message. With a little surreptitious theologizing, Anatole's translation softens each sermon.

In the same way, the Holy Spirit listens to our prayers, the words we speak aloud and the stirrings of our hearts for which we have no words. The Spirit translates and interprets what we want to say to make it an acceptable offering to God. And, the translation process works both ways. Just as important, the Spirit interprets the desires of heaven to our spirits. If we will listen when we pray... If we can manage to spend some of our precious time in silence before God... If we would open our minds and hearts, the Holy Spirit can answer our prayers.

Our wants can be re-centered so they do not always revolve around ourselves. Our strengths can change from occasions for self-promotion into opportunities for service. Our weaknesses no longer have to embarrass us like a pimple in the middle of our face. They can humanize us, enabling us to find the common ground of deeper friendship. Our sins will no longer shackle us to the past because they are forgiven. The consequences of sin are still with us, but they become burdens the Spirit helps us carry willingly the way a nearsighted person wears glasses or contacts gladly in order to overcome that handicap.

The key to this process, as with so much of life, is communication. We don't always know how to communicate with God. We don't have the right words to present our better selves. Moreover, our ears are not accustomed to the language of heaven so we may misinterpret scripture or find ourselves deaf and dumb to what God is saying and doing in the world. It's the work of the Holy Spirit that overcomes our handicaps, communicating to us and for us.

Several years ago, Debby and I needed to negotiate the Miami airport shortly after 9/11. Debby wore a cast over most of her leg and was strictly forbidden to walk. Our airport escort was Charlie who met us with a wheelchair. Holiday crowds jostled through unfamiliar routines trying to catch their flights. The lines at security stretched like a kudzu vine through the corridors. Time was short. Charlie pushed Debby's wheelchair past the line, through the door marked "Authorized Personnel Only," and disappeared with her behind a curtain. Ten minutes later we were waiting to board the airplane. Charlie wasn't magic. Everyone with a gun and a uniform recognized him and waved him through. The Holy Spirit makes prayer possible because heaven and earth are both familiar territory to the Spirit. The nerve center of heaven recognizes and welcomes the Spirit. With his help our prayers are waved through.

Paul puts it better: "God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit

intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (8:27)."

When we think of the Holy Spirit as a coach or midwife during childbirth, or as an interpreter translating a critical communication back and forth between earth and heaven, then we begin to see God as so much more than a ghostly image of the unknown. And when we understand that all creation is groaning because the Maker of heaven and earth continues at work, perfecting what sin has distorted, then we can be confident that God is in control. These are not groans of despair, but of hope

Paul tells the Romans that the goal, the hope of Christian faith is that "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God (8:21)." We live in a period of intense groaning throughout the world. Pundits on TV, radio and the internet are predicting a grim future on the basis of the bad news about the world. The good news of Jesus Christ predicts a better world on the basis of God's promise. The instrument of so much of that promise is the Holy Spirit, invisible to the world, but available to faith.

In the end, the language we use to talk about God, and the knowledge we have about the Holy Trinity is revolutionary. The power of that revolution is not in the words themselves. It's in the powerful Spirit of the Living God who moves among us, coaching, interpreting and

offering a foretaste of the hope that is changing creation.
We believe in the Holy Spirit. Thank God.