

5-23-2021 Blue Water Deep - The Faith Mystery of the Holy Spirit
Acts 2:1-6, 12-21; John 15:26-27; 16:7-15
Pentecost Sunday May 23, 2021
First United Methodist Church - Auburn, Indiana
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Blue Water Deep

One of the most beautiful lakes in the whole world is found near the center of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. It's called Higgin's Lake. Someone told me it once made the list of the most beautiful lakes in the entire world.

One of the distinctive things about the lake is that it is very shallow for over one hundred yards from the shore. The water is just a foot or so deep. You walk and walk but the water remains shallow. The bottom seems almost perfectly flat. The water is sky blue.

Then, within a foot or two, the bottom of the lake drops off and the lake is suddenly about twenty feet deep. The light blue color of the water in the shallows, above the sand, suddenly turns cobalt blue. Duke blue, if you will.

If you take a small boat out on the lake, it is a little unsettling to see the water beneath you suddenly turn from light blue to deep blue. It is like someone drew a line across the lake: on one side of the line the water is one foot deep and on the other side of the line the water is twenty feet deep. I remember sailing a boat on Higgins Lake and it felt like we were flying off the edge of the Grand Canyon.

Today and next Sunday we are sailing out where the water is deep. Today, we are going to be exploring the faith mystery that is the Holy Spirit. Next Sunday, we are going to sail even further out where the water gets very deep indeed, and explore the mystery we call the Trinity.

When the View Drives You to Your Knees

As we come to these conversations about the Holy Spirit and the mystery of the Trinity, I find myself thinking about one of the first times I went up to the top of the John Hancock Building in Chicago. We were visiting the city one December day, and at the end of the day we traveled to the observation floor near the top of that distinctive skyscraper.

When the elevator doors opened, I walked straight over to the windows and looked out towards Lake Michigan. Lake Shore Drive wound around the city, up and down the shoreline, far below. It looked like a ribbon of light as cars went out of the city and came downtown. Tail lights turned bright red as drivers braked at the "S" curve. Other buildings looked like shimmering diamonds hanging between the dark sky above and the earth below. The light cloud cover was orange as it reflected the light below. And

out towards the lake? The lights stopped at the water's edge and then there was a deep darkness where the cold waters of the lake did their winter dance.

My response? I stood near the glass and then dropped to my knees. I was, I think, in high school or college. The whole thing was overwhelming. It was almost too much to take in. I've wondered, now and then, why an adolescent who was so focused on being cool would do such an uncool thing as to drop to his knees. I remember feeling a little dizzy as I looked down, as if I were about to tumble through the glass and out into the air. But it was something more...it was a sense of awe. Of being in the presence of something so great, so mysterious, that I really felt overwhelmed. A sense of awe brought me to my knees.

I tell you this because I believe that when we approach the deep mysteries of God, the deep mysteries of faith, the appropriate posture is awe. There is always more to God than we can understand. There is always more to God than we can see.

There is always more of God than we can see or fully explain or understand. Early in Psalm 139, the writer admits (:6) that fully understanding God is "too wonderful" for him. The psalmist writes, "It is so high that I cannot attain it."

Paul, in the 13th chapter of his 1st Letter to the Corinthians, points out that in this world what we can know of God is partial. We are like people looking through darkly tinted glass. Our knowledge is always partial.

There is always more to God and faith than we can understand, explain or diagram. In fact, any conversation about the deep things of God -like the Holy Spirit and the mystery of the Trinity- is more poetry than engineering. It's more like music than math.

And yet...and yet...we can know enough to know God intimately. The opening chapter of the Gospel of John reminds us that in Jesus of Nazareth God makes himself known to us. The grace and truth of God, John 1:17 says, have come to us in Jesus. It is the Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made God known to us.

So as we come to this conversation, I remember the night when I dropped to my knees out of a sense of awe at what I could see *and* an awareness that there was more out there than I could see or know or explain. Coming to the deep things of God and faith with a sense of awe and humility is a good thing. That may help save us from the temptation to behave as if we know all there is to know about God.

The Holy Spirit Shows Up: Wind and Fire

All of this takes us to the morning of Pentecost. The group of followers of Jesus are all together in one place. Something surprising happens: the Holy Spirit shows up in a powerful way.

It's a mysterious, hard-to-describe moment. The writer of the Book of Acts searches for images to use to help us understand what it was like.

He says there was a sound *like* a violent wind. (*Please notice the qualifying word "like."*) The wind filled the whole house.

Now, you need to remember that the deepest truths about God are more music than math, more poetry than engineering. So is the writer of the book telling us that there was a gale force wind blowing things sideways in the room? I don't think so. I think the writer of Acts is using the image of a strong wind to tell us God filled the room. Because wind was often a sign both of the creative power of God and the nearness of God as God walked with God's people.

Genesis tells us that a wind from God (1:2) swept over the waters and began to create life...bring life out of darkness and nearly nothing.

When the Hebrews, on their way from slavery to freedom, were trapped between the troops of the Pharaoh and the sea, a strong wind parted the waters of the sea for them so there was a way forward.

When Ezekiel, in the Hebrew Bible, talks about the defeated, demoralized people of God, he has a vision of them as nothing much more than a valley of dried up bones. God tells Ezekiel to speak to the bones, and they begin to come together. One bone connects to another. They are still not fully alive, though, until the wind begins to blow and the wind of God -or the spirit of God- fills them.

There was also something *like* tongues of fire which rested on each one of them. Something like tongues of fire rest on each and every person in the room: the person who could pray like an angel and the person who stumbled and stammered if asked to pray; the young person and the older person; the woman and the man; the straight teenager and the gay teenager; the person from Galilee in the north and the person from Judea in the south; the person there because they were desperately hungry for an encounter with the living God and the person who had just shown up out of curiosity and because they had heard about the pre-school; the white man and the black woman; the rascal and the saint; the winner and the loser.

Is Luke telling us fire was dancing on people's heads? Hardly. The writer knows the Jewish scriptures and he knows that fire is a sign of the presence of God...the nearness of God...the power of God in the lives of God's people right now. When God and Abraham make a covenant with one another, in Genesis 15, there is a mysterious ceremony out in the middle of the night with a smoking firepot and a flaming torch. When God decides to set the people free, God speaks to Moses out of a burning bush. When the people of Israel are on their way from Egypt to a new homeland, from slavery to freedom, a pillar of fire leads them.

When the writer of Acts tells us there is something like tongues of fire, the New Testament writer is telling us that God is in the room. Doing something. Bringing new life. Opening a new chapter.

A Definition of the Holy Spirit

This may strike you as inappropriately bold, but let me offer my own definition of the Holy Spirit. When people have asked me, over a cup of coffee or in a Bible study or in the hallway at the Y about the Spirit, here is what I usually say: The Holy Spirit is the presence and power of God in our lives in the now, bringing us to new life, creating faith and courage and love in us so the life we lead looks like the life Jesus calls us to live.

Here are some things I believe I need to say about the Holy Spirit. I hope this is helpful for you.

First, the Holy Spirit is always.

Always - From the Beginning

Some people act as if the Holy Spirit is a late addition to the Trinity. Some claim that the Spirit showed up only after Jesus went back to the Father. I believe scripture makes it very clear that the Spirit was at work from very beginning of Creation.

Second, the Holy Spirit is about new life...new creation.

New Life

The Holy Spirit arrives, as the wind of God blew over the chaotic waters of creation's first morning, and brings us to life. Even when we, like the bones in the valley, look like we will never be alive again, the Spirit or breath of God can move and bring us to new life.

A few years ago I was in Nashville, Tennessee for something called *The Festival of Homiletics*. Pastors and priests and worship leaders come from all around the world to *The Festival of Homiletics* to hear great preaching. Every day there would be three or four worship services, with workshops in between, and almost always I would come away inspired. Doesn't that sound like fun, going off to Atlanta or Chicago or Minneapolis or Nashville to hear three or four days worth of sermons? Three or four days of sermon after sermon, worship service after worship service? You may be yawning on the inside, but let me tell you that when worship and preaching are done well, it's stirring...a miraculous...renewing thing.

Well, I was in Nashville and during the afternoon break I walked over to the historic Ryman Auditorium in downtown Nashville. That brick building is a temple to the world of country music, and it is where they used to have the Grand Ol' Opry. I saw a sign, that afternoon, that said Kris Kristofferson would be appearing that night in concert.

Tickets were available. I decided to skip the evening worship gathering and go to the concert. I bought a ticket.

That night, I walked into the auditorium, with its old wooden seats, and on the stage was a single guitar and a bar stool. I thought the rest of the instruments for the band must be behind a black curtain on stage, but the concert was just Kris and his adult daughter. They sang about six songs together, and then it was just Kris with his guitar and his harmonica.

He looked worn down by life and by some hard living, but he was a man comfortable in his own skin. Between songs, he began to talk about his mistakes, his addictions, and the concert became a holy moment for a lot of us in that room. Kris was a man who had come to terms with God and his own life, and he was at peace.

This singer, who sounds like a frog with a voice problem, told us how his life was coming apart in the middle of his career when he tagged along with some other singers one night as they went to a worship service. The Reverend Jimmie Rogers Snow -with all sorts of ties to the country and Western music world- was preaching. Larry Gatlin sang the song "Help Me (Lord)", and something started happening inside Kris Kristofferson.

The preacher, at some point in the service, simply asked the question, "Is anybody feeling lost?" Kristofferson didn't realize how lost he felt, how lost he was, until he heard that question that night in that way. Kris said he didn't know what was happening but he found himself walking to the front. Kneeling there. Praying. It was a "come to Jesus" moment. Kristofferson didn't know what it all meant, but he handed his life -and his bitter load of regret and shame- over to Jesus.

"I'm kneeling there," Kristofferson says, "and I carry a big load of guilt around...and I was just out of control, crying. It was a release. It really shook me up." Kristofferson later said, "It was just a personal thing. I had some kind of experience that I can't even explain."

The thing that was so clear that night, to those of us sitting in those curved pews, was that the man in front of us was a very different person from the man Kris had described earlier. I'm not sure I have ever been in the presence of someone who was as at peace as the singer was that night. Instead of turmoil and shame and addiction and guilt and a frantic need to grab more fame, there was this peace...this humility. He looked like someone who had put down a weight and left it far behind. Something -or someone- had brought him out of a tortured, guilt-ridden, lost place into a new place.

It was after that experience that Kris Kristofferson wrote his song "Why Me."

When the Holy Spirit shows up, new life has a way of happening...breaking out.

The third thing you need to know about the Holy Spirit is that the Spirit is always about Jesus.

Some people talk about the Holy Spirit almost as if it some kind of different, mysterious divinity than the God we see in Jesus. I've seen and heard people who did and said things that clearly ran counter to the way of Jesus, the mind of Jesus, the teachings of Jesus, and they would explain that the Holy Spirit led them in this new direction. If you hear that sort of thing, don't buy it for a minute because Jesus makes it very clear -in the Gospel of John- that the Holy Spirit or Advocate is always about leading us back to Jesus. Helping us understand what Jesus was trying to make clear. The Holy Spirit is always our tutor in the Jesus way.

I had a friend once who always wanted to talk about the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team. It could be the middle of January, and he would start talking about the Cardinals. It could be the middle of a conversation about the letters of Paul, and he would start talking about the Cardinals. You could be telling him about your kids, and he would start talking about one of the Cardinals and their new baby. Every conversation came back to the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team. With the Holy Spirit, the truth revealed and the conversation always comes back to Jesus.

When we talk about the Holy Spirit, think Jesus.

The Holy Spirit arrives, as Jesus explains over and over again in the Gospel of John, bringing us back to Jesus, helping us know him and love him. If your experience of a religious spirit or spiritual discussion leads you away from Jesus, it may not be the Holy Spirit that is working with you and in you.

Fourth, the Holy Spirit is a gift giver. When we talk about the Holy Spirit, think gifts.

The Apostle Paul, in Romans 12, we have each been given spiritual gifts God can use for the good of the world...and the Church: some of us are able to see meaning in what is happening; some of us have a surprising and robust faith; some of us have the gift of teaching and some of us have the gift of giving. These come from God. These come from the Holy Spirit. Most of the 12th Chapter of the 1st Letter to the Corinthians is about the gifts that the Holy Spirit. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good," Paul says in verse 7.

If you look at the last verses of the 5th Chapter of Paul's Letter to the Galatians, you'll discover the Apostle talking about the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These "fruits of the Spirit" are also a gift.

The other night I drove down to Fort Wayne to celebrate my brother, Edwin's, birthday. My sister in law brought each person a truffle from DeBrand's Chocolate. Each one

came in an individual gift box with a small gold, tie around it. On each box was the name of the chocolate company embossed on the dark, brown cardboard. When you think of the Holy Spirit, think of God as giver. Think of gifts. Each time you see a DeBrand's box, or a South Bend Chocolate Factory box, with a nice gold string tying it up in a pretty way, think about the gifts God gives us through the Holy Spirit so that we can help God heal the world and bring justice, peace and love.

Fifth, the last thing about the Holy Spirit I want you to know is that the Holy Spirit is always about love...and others.

The Spirit is never given to us to make us spiritually puffed up, or to take care of ourselves, but the Holy Spirit always comes to us to help us love others and serve others. Look back at the list of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5, and you'll discover that the first fruit of the Spirit is love.

When you think about the Spirit, don't think mysterious or loud or "they must be drunk even if it is before nine o'clock in the morning," but think love. Think others. Think relationships.

Loving Others

The Holy Spirit is always about helping us use our God-given gifts for the Church, for the world...for others. The movement of the Holy Spirit is always about others. It is never intended to be a spiritual high that we keep for ourselves.

Anne Lamott, when she talks about the Holy Spirit, always seems to talk about how the Holy Spirit moves us to care for others.

Near the end of her book, *Plan B*, Lamott talks about how the Spirit draws us, pushes us, blows us out of our selfish cocoons into a bigger world where others start to matter to us. She writes:

We can see Spirit made visible when people are kind to one another, especially when it's a really busy person, like you, taking care of a needy, annoying, neurotic person, like you. In fact, that's often when we see Spirit most brightly.

You are Spirit, you are love, and even though it is hard to believe sometimes, you are free. You're here to love, and be loved, freely. If you find out next week that you are terminally ill...what will matter are memories of beauty, that people loved you, and that you loved them.

So how do we feed and nourish our spirit, and the spirit of others?

First, find a path, and a little light to see by. Then push up your sleeves and start helping. Every single spiritual tradition says that you must take care of the poor, or you are so doomed that not even Jesus or the Buddha can help you.

You don't have to go overseas. There are people in this country who are poor in spirit, worried, depressed, dancing as fast as they can; their kids are sick, or their retirement savings are gone. There is great loneliness among us, life-threatening loneliness. People have given up on peace, on equality. You do what you can what good people have always done: you bring thirsty people water, you share your food, you try to help the homeless find shelter, you stand up for the underdog.

...you are capable of lives of great joy and meaning. It's what you are made of. And it's what you're here for. Take care of yourselves; take care of one another.

Did you notice what happens when the Holy Spirit fills the room in Jerusalem? Each one of the people began to speak in other languages so that other people from other parts of the world could hear the story of God's love for the world...and for them.

So those early Christians, in that room in Jerusalem, stop thinking about themselves and they begin to speak so that others can understand God...and know God. When the people gather by the Welcome Desk for coffee, when the Staff meets on Monday afternoon, when the Administrative Council convenes, the first question isn't "What can we do for us?" but "What can we do for our neighbors...down the street, on the other side of town, and on the other side of the world? What do we need to do to learn how to speak their languages...share God's love in a way that makes sense to them?"

When I was younger, I thought you could tell that a church was filled with the Spirit because the services were loud. I remember taking our confirmation class to a Pentecostal service in South Bend, one night, and it was amazing. It was loud. It started fast and never seemed to let up...for hours. The youth and I staggered out of the sanctuary after a couple of hours, looked at one another, and said, "Wow!"

Our choir, back at our church on the south side of that city, looked pretty tame compared to that rocking, pounding, sweating praise band we had heard lead worship. There was a time when I thought you could measure how much Spirit a church had by a decibel meter or by whether or not they had folks who spoke in strange praise languages no one else could understand.

I think I was wrong. When the Spirit shows up, people start loving Jesus and they start loving others and they stand up for justice and against racism and throw wide open the doors of God's Church. When the Spirit shows up, people start loving Jesus...and loving one another.

Fire and wind. Blue Water Deep, indeed.

What would a little fire and wind look like in your life?

What would a little fire and wind look like if this room were filled with the Spirit and tongues of fire were resting on every last one of us?