

TUMC Sermon 'the Holy Spirit' by Peter Haresnape March 12, 2017

I have a confession to make. When the preaching team met to discern our series; Credo: Faithful Moorings, we sought to encounter some of the key doctrines and concepts that inform our Christian, Anabaptist, Mennonite, Canadian, Urban, 21st Century faith. Each member of preaching team offered a suggestion about what they might cover. We have already had many of these sermons – focusing on [Creation](#), on [Sin](#), on [ecclesiology](#), on [God](#) and on [Jesus](#).

For some time I have been wondering what Mennonites make of the Holy Spirit.

I have been curious about doctrine, yes, but more interested in belief. What ideas do people in this congregation have about the Holy Spirit? What are the practices based on these ideas, and what are the experiences that have informed these ideas?

ideas -> actions -> experiences -> ideas

But to the matter of my confession. The reason you are hearing a sermon on the Holy Spirit today is because I wanted to hear what someone at TUMC had to say about the Holy Spirit. I did not particularly expect it to be me. But here I am. And I'd like to ask something from you if you see me after the service. Tell me a story about the Holy Spirit in your life. An experience, an idea, a question, anything. That is my request of you.

Throughout this sermon I will be working around the central question – what IS the Holy Spirit? Is the Holy Spirit a person? Is the Holy Spirit an experience? Both, either, neither, other. And I want to point out that Brother Tim gave an excellent sermon two weeks ago in which he quoted his private rants: “Is God a person?” he would fume, and “Please let's stop talking of God as a being”. And I'm listening to this, five pages into my own sermon about the Personhood of the Holy Spirit. I started to wonder if after the service I should make a hasty exit down the fire escape rather than wait for Brother Tim's firm handshake.

But of course, this was all Brother Tim's way of explaining how he came to realise that language reform was not the secret formula to ensure TUMC's continued thriving. Instead, what is needed is the ongoing encounter with the Divine Mystery. Whatever language we use is at best only pointing to that encounter. So that is my hope for my own inadequate words.

In my preparation to talk about the Holy Spirit, as well as reading previous sermons in this series, I scanned the writing on our website, our Facebook, the emails we send. I was surprised. We do not talk much about the Holy Spirit in this congregation, but in our conversation we mention the Spirit a LOT.

Sometimes when the Spirit is named it can be attributed to mere habit, superstition or shorthand. It feels like it might be a simple substitute for 'God', or 'the Force'. And other times when the Spirit is named in the same way, it is done with utter sincerity, joy, and precision. It is much the same in the Bible, where the Spirit does not get talked about much, but gets a lot of references.

Although it might be more accurate to say that there are many references that we interpret as being about the Holy Spirit. Without a capitalised concept of a being called the Holy Spirit, you can easily read most of the Biblical references to a holy spirit, an impersonal force or trance, or

‘spirit’ in the sense of a way of being or acting. A geist not a ghost. The original authors and audiences may have meant an individual in a devout frame of mind, a course of action that accomplishes God’s purposes, or a spiritual entity that is God or represents God. When we go looking, the Holy Spirit is throughout the scriptures.

In the Creation Story, God’s Spirit is hovering over the void. During the Exodus, the Holy Spirit inspires the crafters who create the Tabernacle. The Holy Spirit comes upon the more warlike judges like Gideon, Jephthah and Samson. The Spirit is said to be with men like Joseph and Daniel who interpret dreams for foreign kings. Some of the Prophets speak of the Spirit of God resting on them, and they are all said to be inspired. During the difficult times of exile and loss, the Prophets spoke of a future era where the Spirit of God would be poured out on all people – regardless of class, age or gender.

In the life of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is part of his conception, and at his baptism the Holy Spirit descends upon him, and sends him out into the wilderness where he endures temptation – tracked by [Marilyn’s sermon from last week](#). When he reads at the synagogue he chooses, as his ‘mission statement’, the text read earlier from the Prophet Isaiah beginning ‘The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor...’ So Jesus is fully immersed in the Holy Spirit, both by his nature and his choice. In the fullness of time, he promises the disciples that he will send the Comforter, the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth to them. And after he ascends into Heaven, the disciples receive the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

In his writings the Apostle Paul refers to the Spirit as an active agent of God’s will. The Spirit is a person, who acts to help us, and intercedes for us, interpreting on our behalf. And that is how I understood the Holy Spirit in my upbringing. I was raised in an evangelical and charismatic church in the East of England. My parents and their friends had begun the church after finding that what they perceived as the move of God was not of interest to the various other ministers – Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, in their small city.

The new church shared teaching with similar churches around the country and often had exchanges other parts of the world, including visiting speakers from North America. There was a desire for spiritual gifts like prophecies, speaking in tongues, and miraculous healing. You might have heard of the Toronto Blessing. This was what I was taught was the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit was the presence of God among us, through miracles. Everyone had a stock of stories about how God had answered prayers – prayers for healing, or for financial support at a key moment, or for special insight and understanding.

In fact, this was part of what it meant to be a believer. You were expected to exercise spiritual gifts. I found similar patterns among friends who grew up in various Christian denominations – a feeling that an authentic believer would seek and show some spiritual gift or experience, whether a sense of transcendence, or speaking in tongues, or spiritual healing. We believed that this was the substance and evidence of the life of faith. I wonder what evidence our young people expect of their faith?

In the churches I grew up in, our primary method was prayer. We prayed, based on the promises that God makes throughout the Old and New Testaments, and the various names for God. For example, God as a provider, as a shepherd, as protector. We claimed these through Jesus, and the Holy Spirit delivered.

What father among you, if his son asks for bread, would give him a stone, or if he asks for a fish, would give him a snake instead of the fish? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” – Luke 11:11 & 13

You can see why we would expect miracles. If a believer has a true relationship with God, then it means that they have the right to ask and to expect an answer. If a believer is filled with the Holy Spirit, they have been given power and anointing. If people were being healed and prophecies were coming true, it was a sign that this community was close with the loving God, source of all good things.

All three Persons of the Trinity have a role – God loved us, and Jesus died for us, the Spirit was with us, empowered to act for our wellbeing. But they are also somewhat compressed.

The Spirit here is essentially the action or presence of God the Father – the Spirit is the verb, God is the noun. And likewise, there isn't much place for the teachings and life of Jesus. In my church upbringing we heard about his miracles of healing and provision, but not what he taught, because in this theology, his purpose on earth was to die, be raised to life again, ascend into heaven, and send the Holy Spirit to be with us.

Apart from jettisoning the teachings of Jesus, an unfortunate effect of all this is to make the faith life very individual. Have I accepted Jesus, do I have the Holy Spirit? Am I able to speak in tongues and perform miracles, etc. The individual is the site of God's presence and power.

But that is not what we believe. Our community studies the teachings of Jesus and even dares to imagine living them. And for us, the Holy Spirit is not something found acting in an individual. The Spirit permeates and surrounds our experiences as church – but it is really hard to point and say ‘there! That right there is the Holy Spirit!’ Of course you can't pin down the Spirit.

Consider some of the Biblical words we interpret as Spirit – wind, breath. It is this Spirit that is breathed into us earth-creatures during the Creation accounts. Breath is more than a metaphor for the Holy Spirit – consider its nature. Where is your breath? Where is it right now? In your lungs? Going into your lungs, or coming out? Is it still your breath once you have breathed it out? Are the air molecules drifting in your direction at the moment – are they your breath? Does my breath end when it leaves my lungs? When it leaves my mouth? When it gets a certain distance away from me or when it mingles a certain amount with the world's air?

When does my breath become your breath?

We have the idea that we are concrete individual bodies and souls, what [Craig referred to as ‘Buffered Individuals’](#). But in fact with every breath we are connected to each other. We are linked through the medium of the creation we inhabit. We are not standing on the surface of the earth, we are deep within our planet's atmosphere and immersed in the elemental stew of matter

that connects our breath to the breaths of every living being and our bones to the bones of every being that has ever died (except one guy).

So that conception of the Spirit certainly does not rest with any one of us, but only with all of us. People encounter that Spirit when they encounter us collectively, and it is the first thing that communicates to them, before they pick up a Hymnal or hear a sermon or even join a committee.

Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective suggests that this Spirit encounter is a continuation of the ministry of Jesus. “By the power of the Holy Spirit, the church preaches, teaches, testifies, heals, loves, and suffers, following the example of Jesus its Lord.” The work of the Holy Spirit in the church conforms to and continues the ministry of Jesus. The Holy Spirit on earth today is the fullness of God found in Jesus, made available to all humanity, poured out peoples of all nations.

We can say that the life and work of the church is both inspired by and expressive of the Holy Spirit. But we could get the same result by removing the capital letters and saying that the collective spirit of our church is holy, and as long as we are living up to Jesus’s example, we are acting in a holy spirit. We can agree that the Holy Spirit is among us, but we start to imagine that it is our spirit – derived from the Church.

This brings us to the importance of the Holy Spirit as a person.

Paul wrote that “the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.”

I suggest that we mostly start to think about the Holy Spirit when we are running out of options. *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* says “By the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the church comes to unity in doctrine and action.” This, to me, implies that the Spirit is present and at work when we are not in unity – when we are disagreeing.

It is certainly the guidance of the Holy Spirit that we look to when we can’t work things out any other way. For example, the disagreements about the place of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Christians within the Mennonite Church. We tried reading the Bible, but that didn’t produce uniformity, and we tried to appeal to the example of Jesus, but that did not convince everyone of a common path, and we continue to pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and even muse on the awkwardness of people being guided in opposite directions by the same Spirit.

Why do we appeal to the Holy Spirit to find us a way out when our other ways have failed?

That might sound a bit cynical, but I have a serious point. The Holy Spirit waits with us in times of uncertainty and challenging topics. Because the Holy Spirit is not ‘the collective will of the Church’. The sum total of our meeting minutes and strategic plans. If that is all the Holy Spirit is, then the Spirit would desert us in difficulty, or division. There could be no Spirit of reconciliation or courageous truth or longing for healing in times of wounding. But instead “the

Spirit helps us in our weakness”. The Holy Spirit is God choosing to be with us in person, as God has always sought to be with us in person.

Why do I emphasise ‘Person’. A person has, a will, a defined identity, and the ability to make decisions and relationships. The Holy Spirit chooses to be with us. The Holy Spirit relates to us, responds to us, and persists with us. Just as Jesus did, so the Spirit does.

Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective claims that “The Holy Spirit enables our life in Christian community, comforts us in suffering, is present with us in time of persecution, intercedes for us in our weakness, guarantees the redemption of our bodies, and assures the future redemption of creation.”

The Spirit is God choosing to be with us, to listen to us, to translate our garbled ideas and comfort us in pain and grief. And that means that the supportive words we offer each other, the outstretched hand, the subtle gift, and late night emails are part of what the Holy Spirit is doing.

And the Spirit is with us to pray with us when we cannot pray ourselves. I don’t know about you, but I am overwhelmed by the world we are in. It is hard to give God a detailed list of priority tasks. But I can manage a wordless groan. That pain, that groan, is the Spirit moving when our own spirits are weak or tired or oppressed.

Though your heart and flesh may fail you, God is the strength of your heart and your portion forever. God is here with us because we are weak and divided and we can’t breathe and we can’t speak and we can’t think, and all creation is groaning around us.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Breathe.*

*This was a phrase from an earlier sermon of Marilyn Zehr, lead pastor of Toronto United Mennonite Church. I am indebted to her as a preacher and a pastor.