

**The Rev. Dr. Jan C. Heller**  
**Year A, Seventh Sunday of Easter, John 17:1-11**  
**28 May 2017**  
**Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA**

This past Thursday we celebrated the Ascension, and we heard Luke's version of it from Acts this morning. Actually, that may be his second version; there's another, somewhat more cryptic version of it at the end of some, but not all, translations of Luke's Gospel. In any case, if the Ascension is behind us, we know Pentecost can't be far away and, indeed, we will celebrate it next Sunday. As we discussed last week, Ascension and Pentecost, taken together, symbolize how the resurrected Jesus is both absent from us and present to us—absent from us in a heavenly court that, it turns out, is surprisingly still quite close by and present to us in the Spirit, through which he is doing God's work in us and through us. We'll say more about this next week, but before we get to Pentecost I want to spend a bit of time this morning exploring this Spirit. It is an important aspect of our faith that, I suspect, we too often tend to gloss over.

In fact, unless we were raised in a Pentecostal or charismatic church, it's likely we've given very little attention to the Spirit. Personally, I can tell you that I have no memory of the subject ever coming up in class or conversation during my seminary training. But I do recall a professor of church history discussing how the doctrine of the Trinity, which took about 400 years to get formulated in the way we have it today, can be traced to the very early practice of Christians who prayed *to* God, in the *name* of Jesus, and in the *power* of the Spirit. And that connection between power and Spirit is, as we heard in our reading from Acts, not accidental. But before we move on, I want to remind you that the Sunday *after* Pentecost is Trinity Sunday, and the Rev. Nancy Tiederman has offered to preside and preach

at our services on that day, so today I won't discuss the full-blown Trinitarian understanding of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But, again, I do want to give some attention to how early Christians understood the Spirit—before, we might say, it became the Holy Spirit. So, let's step back and get the bigger picture before moving on to Pentecost next week.

In the last few months, I've been spending a lot of time comparing and contrasting our understanding of Jesus as Messiah with first century Jewish beliefs about the Messiah and, in turn, with even more basic Jewish affirmations about the one God. In all that time, except perhaps in passing at Jesus' baptism or during his temptations immediately after his baptism, I've hardly had an occasion to mention the Spirit. And yet, while Jews certainly did not think about the God's Spirit in Trinitarian terms, they did and do use the language of spirit when discussing God's presence—especially when discussing what's called the Shekinah in Hebrew, that is, God's shining glory that, for humans, was too intense to view and be able to live. They encountered this presence guiding them in the wilderness after the Exodus and then again, much later, in the inner-most part of the Temple, in the holy of holies, where God was thought to tabernacle or dwell in a special sense.

But early Christians—early *Jewish* Christians—took this more traditional Jewish understanding of God's spirit and began to rethink it in ways that were both rooted in their Jewish tradition and influenced by their experience of the resurrection of Jesus. This should not surprise us, but the results of their rethinking may. Just as, after the resurrection, Jesus very quickly became intimately identified with God—such that John could say that when the disciples had seen the Son they had seen the Father—so God's spirit very quickly began to

be identified with *both* the resurrected Jesus *and* God. That is, the Spirit was discussed, at the same time, as both the spirit of Jesus *and* spirit of God. It was not that these Jewish Christians no longer believed that God is one God—that is, in their own minds they didn't cease to be Jewish monotheists—it was more that they came to believe that, when they saw and heard Jesus, they were seeing and hearing God, and—here's the point—when they were seeing and hearing God in Jesus, they believed *it was because of the Spirit working in them*. The Spirit was God's presence with early Christians in the way God's shining, glorious presence had been with Israel in the Exodus and in the Temple, and more—that presence was now shared jointly by the Messiah and the Spirit.

So, right from the beginning, we could say there was a sort of mysterious elusiveness about the Spirit—Jesus said it was like the wind; we knew it was present when we felt its effects, but we couldn't tell where it came from or where it was going. For early Jews, it was the way they expressed God's presence in the world and with them even when they also believed that nothing—not even all of creation—could finally contain or encompass this God. For early Jewish Christians, the Spirit was this as well, but it also became associated with the continuing presence of Jesus after the Ascension. In this way, the Spirit also began to have a special association with the church itself, the new family that Jesus had called into existence with his Jewish friends and soon to include gentiles from the entire world. They were to be living examples of the new humanity, the new creation of God in the Messiah, and all of this is empowered or brought about through the Spirit of God and Jesus working in us. Saint Paul would put it this way: Jesus is the true ikon or image of God since Adam, also created in the image of God, failed to live as God had intended. We, as the Messiah's new family, are to imitate or

conform ourselves to this true image of God in Jesus, and we do this by living under the leading of the Spirit. The Spirit can be said to animate or empower our present lives so that, in the future, they might come ever close to the image of God in Jesus. One commentator suggests, that “The spirit was not...[for early Christians] a ‘doctrine’ or ‘dogma’ to be discussed, but the *breath of life* which put them in a position to discuss everything else – and, more to the point, to worship, pray, love and work” (NT Wright, *Paul*, p. 710, emphasis added).

I don’t imagine for a moment this is easy to comprehend and I’ll take another run at it next week in any case, but I want us to take away from this how the Spirit is not only animates us to become the people God would have us to be and empowers us to do the work that God would have us to do, it also a kind of glue that holds us together in unity as a community—“...one Body and one Spirit, one hope in God’s call to us; One Lord, one Faith, one Baptism; One God and Father of all.” The Spirit is what helps to make us one people, united in Christ, serving each other and the world, fulfilling God’s purposes in and for creation. And we’ll know the Spirit is working in us when we see the effects of its presence—when we love God with all our hearts, with all our minds, and with all our strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.