**GREENLAND HILLS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

**March 19, 2017**

**SCRIPTURE**: Isaiah 42:1-4; Joel 2:28-29; Galatians 5:22-23, 25

But here is my servant, the one I uphold; my chosen, who brings me delight. I’ve put my spirit upon him; he will bring justice to the nations. He won’t cry out or shout aloud or make his voice heard in public. He won’t break a bruised reed; he won’t extinguish a faint wick, but he will surely bring justice. He won’t be extinguished or broken until he has established justice in the land. The coastlands await his teaching.

After that I will pour out my spirit upon everyone; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. In those days, I will also pour out my spirit on the male and female slaves.

But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If we live by the spirit, let us also walk by the spirit.

**SERMON** *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* Roy Atwood

This year for Lent, we’re doing a sermon series titled “I Believe...” about our various beliefs as Christians. You’re all invited to join us this evening from 5 to 7 for the discussion group that goes along with our sermon series. Specifically, we’re exploring the Apostle’s Creed as the foundational statement of our Christian faith. Written sometime in the seventh century, the Apostle’s Creed serves as a summary of Christian theology for many denominations in the Western tradition. Two weeks ago, we talked about the nature of God in general, as well as God the Father, the first person of the Trinity, whom the Apostle’s Creed says is the almighty creator of heaven and earth. Last week, we talked about Jesus. He gets a whole paragraph in the Apostle’s Creed! Apparently, he’s an important figure in Christianity.

Then we get to the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, which is what we’re discussing today. As you saw earlier in the service, the Apostle’s Creed doesn’t get too specific on the Holy Spirit, to say the least. Here’s what it says – I believe in the Holy Spirit. That’s it! No discussion of what the spirit is, what it comes from, what it does – just that we believe in it, and that’s all we’re going to say on that subject, thank you very much. Preaching a sermon based on six words – I believe in the Holy Spirit – isn’t exactly an enviable task, but let’s see what we can learn together.

Now, the inspiration for this sermon series is a book entitled “Creed” by Adam Hamilton, a Perkins School of Theology graduate and the senior pastor of one of the largest Methodist churches in the country. In his chapter on the Holy Spirit, he defines it as the active work of God in our lives. I’ll say that again – the Holy Spirit is the active work of God in our lives. And as Hamilton talks about the Holy Spirit, he consistently describes it as an inner voice that nudges us in the direction of godly behavior. So, when we’re out on a walk and we feel the urge to go back and pick up that piece of trash we passed, that’s the Holy Spirit at work. When we randomly think about calling up an old friend to reconnect, that’s the Holy Spirit. When we hear about people suffering from an incurable disease, or people who lost their homes in the wake of a natural disaster, or people whose rights and freedoms are being restricted by the government, or people who are being ignored by society as a whole – when we hear about these people and we feel compelled to help them, to march in their honor, and to donate to organizations that provide them with assistance – all that is the active work of God in our lives, the work of the Holy Spirit, empowering, guiding, and shaping us to be the people God calls us to be.

Yet I fear that this conception of the Holy Spirit might be too limiting, that we might be putting the Holy Spirit in a box and leaving it there. One of my Old Testament professors, Susanne Scholz, frequently drilled in our heads that we must avoid what she called the PPS model of Christianity – a Christianity that is overly privatized, personalized, and sentimentalized. I’m afraid that Hamilton’s description of the Holy Spirit might be going too far in that direction – a Holy Spirit that is entirely contained within the bounds of the godly emotions that I feel. When I feel the urge to do something godly, that’s the Holy Spirit. But my question is - can the Holy Spirit be more than this? Can the Holy Spirit be more than this?

To attempt to answer this question, I’ve stitched together three different mentions of the Holy Spirit in the Bible into our one Scripture passage for today. Now, depending on your perspective, I either cut up the Bible and haphazardly taped it back together or, in the vein of a kaleidoscope, a quilt, or a mosaic, I created a beautiful composite out of separate pieces. Hopefully, I can convince you that it’s the latter and not the former.

First, we have the passage from Isaiah 42. Let’s read that again. “But here is my servant, the one I uphold; my chosen, who brings me delight. I’ve put my spirit upon him; he will bring justice to the nations. He won’t cry out or shout aloud or make his voice heard in public. He won’t break a bruised reed; he won’t extinguish a faint wick, but he will surely bring justice. He won’t be extinguished or broken until he has established justice in the land. The coastlands await his teaching.”

Here the prophet Isaiah is delivering a message from God about God’s servant, the one filled with the spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. To the Jewish listeners at the time, this servant would be a messiah, someone chosen by God to restore the Israelite kingdom to glory. As Christians, we look back and see the image of Christ in this scripture, a servant who teaches justice across the land. Yet, I think this piece of scripture can be talking about each of us as well. As followers of Christ, we’re all called to be God’s servant, filled with the Holy Spirit, bringing about justice.

What kind of justice is this? It’s gentle justice. It’s justice that doesn’t make a scene in public. It’s justice that comes across a bruised and bent reed, and is so gentle that it doesn’t break it. It’s justice that walks past a faint flame, and is so gentle that the flame isn’t extinguished. The Holy Spirit is gentle justice. What does gentle justice look like today? It’s certainly not righteous indignation that whips itself into a fury and goes around breaking reeds and snuffing flames. No, it’s a calm, it’s a peaceful, it’s a listening, it’s a sympathetic, it’s a gentle justice.

What else is the Holy Spirit? It’s not just gentle justice. The prophet Joel says it’s an all-inclusive gentle justice. Let’s look at Joel 2. “After that, I will pour out my spirit upon everyone; your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. In those days, I will also pour out my spirit on the male and female slaves.” You see, the Holy Spirit is with men and women, young and old, powerful and powerless. The Holy Spirit, the spirit of God, the active work of God in the world, is for everyone. And that sounds all great, until we realize that everyone means those people too. You know who I’m talking about – the coworkers who you avoid at all costs, the family members you’re all too happy to see only once a year, the politicians you can’t stand to hear or even really think about. When we allow the Holy Spirit to be all-inclusive, we must acknowledge that everyone has the spirit of God within them, that everyone has something important to bring to the table, that everyone has redeeming qualities no matter how hard we might have to look for them. The Holy Spirit is all-inclusive gentle justice.

And this all leads us to Paul’s letter to the Galatians. “But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If we live by the spirit, let us also walk by the spirit.” I love the role the conjunction “but” plays when these passages are stitched together like this. Yes, we may all have the Holy Spirit, but this is what that spirit makes. You can’t just claim that whatever you say is the spirit of God, because the spirit of God produces fruit, and we know what that fruit looks like. It looks like love. It looks like joy. It looks like peace and patience. It looks like kindness and goodness. It looks like faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The Holy Spirit doesn’t just nudge us to do good things, but it produces real results. It’s an all-inclusive gentle justice with real results.

Now I’ve gone this far without mentioning an important fact about the word “spirit” in our Bibles. The words for spirit in both Hebrew and Greek have multiple meanings. “Ruwach” in Hebrew and “pneuma” in Greek don’t just mean “spirit”; they also mean “breath” and “wind”. And they’re translated various ways in the Bible. Genesis says, “The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” The word translated as “wind” is “ruwach”, so it’s not just a wind from God, but also God’s breath, and the spirit of God, all wrapped up in one.

And this understanding is important for the last sentence in our scriptures today – “If we live by the spirit, let us also walk by the spirit.” We could also translate this as – if we live by the breath or if we live by the wind. And of course, all of us live by the breath; it’s necessary for life. And all of us live by the wind; it provides the rain that nourishes the food we eat. So, what do we do if we live by the breath, if we live by the wind, if we live by the spirit? We walk by the spirit.

Notice the active nature of the word “walk”. We don’t stand around by the spirit. We don’t roll our eyes and complain to our friends by the spirit. We don’t post on Facebook by the spirit. We don’t have a heated discussion over dinner by the spirit. No, we walk by the spirit. We get our hands dirty by the spirit. We loosen our purse strings by the spirit. We volunteer our time by the spirit. The Holy Spirit is active. The Holy Spirit is all-inclusive. The Holy Spirit is gentle justice. The Holy Spirit is real results.

And so, yes, the Holy Spirit is like Adam Hamilton describes in his book – the active work of God in our lives – the internal, emotional nudges we feel to be godlier. But the Holy Spirit isn’t just the active work of God in our lives; it’s also the active work of our lives in God. It’s not something we wait to passively receive. It’s something we actively search out. Because, when we connect with the spirit of God within us, when we live out the Holy Spirit, we are breathing God into the world. We are producing self-control, gentleness, faithfulness, goodness, kindness, patience, peace, joy, and love. Our world needs the Holy Spirit, and we can’t afford to just sit around and wait for it. Amen.