

**“God’s Breath”**  
**John 20:19-23; Psalm 16:5-11**

“Grandpa,” began the mature, college educated granddaughter, suddenly sounding like a little girl again, “How will I know when I’m in love?”

“Well,” replied the immediately serious grandfather, surprised and pleased his sophisticated granddaughter would ask him anything, “there are a number of elements related to that question. The first is the practical. Do the two of you share the same morals, values, goals, faith? Do you like to do the same things? Want similar elements out of life? Do you share a common view of money, children...?”

“Yes, yes, I know that,” interrupted the anxious granddaughter. “I realize a lot of people mess up by not exploring those issues. But what about the feeling? How can I know it’s real?”

“I see people who seem to be deeply in love, but a few years later it all falls apart. Or, worse than that can be a destructive love, like an emotionally or physically abusive spouse. So many things are done in the name of love, it is hard for me to see how I will recognize the real thing.”

“That’s true,” mused the grandfather. “Love is such a complex mix of the emotional, physical, mental, and shall we say, spiritual, it is difficult to categorize or measure. And yet, we know it is real. We recognize the genuine article when we see it.”

“Give me an example,” demanded the perplexed granddaughter.

“Alright,” replied the grandfather. “Have you ever looked closely at your grandmother and my wedding pictures?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Ever notice how incredibly beautiful your grandmother is in those pictures?”

“Yeah, she was so pretty.”

“Well, she’s eighty-five-years old now. And any unbiased person in comparing her then and now would have to note her youthful beauty has faded. And yet when I look at her, all I can see is that gorgeous person for whom my heart, soul and mind long to spend every moment of every day.

“That,” smiled the grandfather, “is love.”

The Holy Spirit is an element of the Christian faith that is hard to define, recognize, or claim with certainty. Like love, we know the Spirit exists. Through the Christian centuries, people have discussed it, acknowledged it, claimed its presence. But also like love, the Spirit carries great opportunity for abuse, its mantle often invoked for words and practices we find questionable. And yet, especially in hindsight, we witness how God’s Spirit has empowered His people to reach beyond their own capabilities to do great things for the kingdom.

Our scripture lesson this morning finds Jesus’ disciples gathered together on Easter evening. Scared, uncertain of their future, no clue of what they should do, they huddle behind locked doors. All of a sudden Jesus stands among them. “Peace be with you,” greets and soothes Jesus. He shows them his nail pierced hands, speared side. Moving from the depths of despair to the pinnacle of joy, Jesus once again calms them with the words, “Peace be with you.” Then He states His intention: “‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

The Holy Spirit thus became the catalyst, the forcefield, turning those fearful, cowering disciples into heralds of a new faith that changed the world.

On the first day of school, the kindergarten teacher said: "If anyone has to go to the bathroom, hold up two fingers." A little voice from the back of the room spoke up asking: "How will that help?"

When Jesus breathed on those disciples that evening, they must have wondered: How will that help? But it changed their lives.

We often talk about the Holy Spirit as the third manifestation of God, the part of God whose work illumines and accentuates Jesus Christ. We believe the Holy Spirit is God indwelling within the life of every Christian. Like love, the Spirit is difficult to touch or feel, hard to define or separate into a neat category, impossible to catch in a bottle. Again, like love, it is easier to witness manifestations of the Spirit.

For instance, think of a time when your conscience prevented you from doing something wrong. That was the Holy Spirit working in your life.

Think of a situation in which you felt led to do something, maybe an act of kindness, a step in the right vocational direction. That is how the Holy Spirit works.

Think of a time when you reached beyond yourself, gave sacrificially, committed to do something for God beyond what you perceived were your abilities, or even desires. That was the Holy Spirit leading you.

Those first disciples did not morph into enthusiastic spokespeople for the Gospel on their own. They were transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit working in their lives.

Commenting on Wagner's music, Mark Twain once said: "It's better than it sounds."

Well, the Holy Spirit's functions are far better than our feeble attempts to describe them. When words fail us, our hearts still witness to the power of God to change our lives.

In many respects, like those first disciples, we are huddled together in this sanctuary while a vicious outside world pounds at our doors. How can we speak a gospel of love, protect our children, find the strength to confront a culture fraught with wayward intentions and irreligious motives?

We can't. Unless we allow God's Holy Spirit to work within us.

God's Spirit will make us bold. God's Spirit finds within us the ability, the motivation to speak and live lives of love and goodness. The Holy Spirit generates a confidence that God is with us, guiding and directing us, leading us as we seek to do God's will.

The Greek word translated, "breathe" as in "he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit,'" is found only here in the New Testament. It recalls the Genesis account of God breathing life into the first human. It reminds us how God's Spirit breathes new life into us, reconstitutes our orientation from fear and uncertainty, into disciples seeking ways to spread the love of Jesus Christ by word and deed. The Holy Spirit breathes the breath of God into our very being.

In his book Jesus Means Freedom, Ernst Kasemann tells of a conversation that took place in 1952 when the Netherlands suffered a severe series of storms and floods.

In a church parish in which people felt strictly bound to obey the commandments, the waves and the high water threatened the nearby dike.

The police notified the church pastor that the dike would have to be strengthened. Since it was Sunday, the pastor found himself in a religious dilemma. Should he summon the people of the parish to do the necessary work, thus profaning the Sabbath? Or, should he abandon them to destruction in order to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy?

The pastor turned to the church council for guidance. Their arguments were as might be expected: We live to carry out God's will. God, being omnipotent, can always perform a miracle. In life or in death our duty is obedience.

Growing exasperated, the pastor tried one final argument: Did not Jesus himself, on occasion, break the Fourth Commandment and declare that the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath? The members of the church council became very quiet, perhaps at a temporary loss for words.

Then a venerable old man rose to speak. "I have always been troubled, Pastor, by something that I have never yet ventured to say publicly. Now I must say it. I have always had the feeling that our Lord Jesus was just a bit of a liberal."

When we allow the Holy Spirit to work within us, we change, become bold in our faith. Our openness to God motivates us to love more, serve more, strive to be more like Jesus.

#### "God's Breath"

When Jesus breathed on His disciples that evening, it was the very breath of God. Their willingness to accept that living part of Christ, to allow it to infuse the very core of their beings, not only changed their lives, but the direction of a world, right up to you and me.

The Lord's Supper provides an opportunity to recall, reconnect, with God's Spirit. The bread and grape juice remind us of Jesus' offer to transform our lives, make us new people, agents of love and goodness.

As we partake of these symbols of Jesus' sacrifice and commitment to us, let each one of us ponder this question: Today, am I allowing God's Spirit, God's breath, to work within me?

Ludwig L. Weaver, Jr.  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
June 6, 2010