

Sermon – June 30th 2024 – Bolton United Church

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Lectionary Scriptures
in message / liturgy:

I Corinthians 12: 1 – 11
Mark 5: 24b – 34

3,250 words

Additional Scripture
references:

Isaiah 11:1 – 2
Acts 2:1 – 4
Matthew 3: 13 – 16

Key songs:

MV 44 Shadow and Substance
MV 79 Spirit, Open My Heart
VU 375 Spirit of Gentleness
VU 315 Holy, Holy, Holy
VU 381+Spirit of Life

Additional music:

Lost and Found (Robin Mark)
One God (Joseph M. Martin)

Seeing is Believing

They say that seeing is believing.

People are mostly visual learners. Someone can tell you a story or a fact, and although it registers, it's sort of in that region where it might be true, but you're really not sure.

But if you see something, then you are far more likely to believe it.

Our Gospel reading this morning gave us two examples of that. The woman who had been afflicted by bleeding for many years touched Jesus' cloak, and was healed.

Jesus felt the power go out from him, but hadn't seen what had happened. But the woman who was healed knew what had happened, and she told him the truth as she saw it. Jesus told her to go in peace, free of suffering.

Even Jesus didn't know what to make of things he hadn't seen - and, as we discussed last week, Jesus was God in human form. Being God, he was supposed to be omniscient - yet even he had an inability to trust something he hadn't seen with his own, human, eyes.

In fact, most of what we experience when we think of God is unseen.

Hands up if you've ever actually seen God?

I don't mean metaphorically, like you've seen God in a child's laughter, or you've seen God in a meadow, or anything like that.

Have you actually seen God?

No, of course not. God (whether we're talking God the Father, God the Son, or God the Spirit) is something unseen.

Jesus was seen, only for about three decades. Then he, too, has been unseen, right to this very day.

Nobody has ever seen the Holy Spirit.

What is the Spirit, anyway?

The concept of the Spirit goes back to the Hebrew Testament times, mentioned in the book of Isaiah:

Isa. 11:1-2 There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. 2 The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, The Spirit of counsel and might, The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD

We've been talking the last few weeks about the Trinity, which is a very New Testament concept. So is it surprising to find mention of the Spirit that far back?

Actually, speaking of the Trinity, that's a word you won't find in the Bible anywhere. The word Trinity doesn't exist in any Scripture. It is a word that describes the embodiment of what we call the "triune" God. Triune is, itself, a contraction of "tri" meaning three and "unity".

Thus, as we might say it colloquially, "three in one."

This might be the hardest of all the concepts to get. We already struggled with how Jesus could be both God and human at the same time.

Now we are adding a new twist - the unseen Holy Spirit is also part of the triune God.

Yet another part we can't see!

The New Testament introduction to the role of the Spirit comes from chapter 2 of the book of Acts:

1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled

with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

However, as I said, the term “trinity” does not appear in the Bible.

The first use of the word "Trinity" was by Theophilus of Antioch writing in the late 2nd century. He defines the Trinity as God, his Word and his Wisdom in the context of a discussion of the first three days of creation, following the early Christian practice of identifying the Holy Spirit as the Wisdom of God.

As we discussed last week, the “Word” means Jesus - the Word made flesh. We heard the reference from Isaiah to “the Spirit of the LORD... the Spirit of wisdom.”

The Nicene Creed, written in 325, made little mention of the Spirit, but was expanded at the First Council of Constantinople in 381, to read “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified”

By this time, liturgy had solidified what was implied by the prophet Isaiah, that the Spirit of the LORD was, in fact, part of that same LORD God, in much the way that Jesus, the Word made flesh, was part and parcel of that same LORD God.

Why did it take so long? Probably because the Spirit was the least seen part of the Trinity. People believed they had seen at least the effects of God’s creation, and both his love and his wrath. People had seen Jesus, at least for a time.

But the Spirit? Sight unseen. Unseen and therefore, perhaps, less believed.

We take the Trinity for granted now.

Baptism is generally conferred with the Trinitarian formula, "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" and that's frequently used as a Benediction (which is essentially Latin for blessing) also.

But that's because we are members of a faith community that is Trinitarian in nature, and because we've grown up with the concept.

How to explain?

In his article "Saint Patrick, The Shamrock, and The Trinity," Father Michael Van Sloun writes:

The shamrock is a symbol both for the Holy Trinity and St. Patrick (389-461). The shamrock is a clover plant with a yellow flower and leaflets made up of a stem with three small green leaves. The plant is very common and widely distributed throughout Ireland.

St. Patrick was a zealous missionary to the Irish, a people who upon his arrival in 432 had heard little or nothing of Jesus and his gospel. St. Patrick was an energetic traveler, a determined evangelizer, and a courageous preacher, and as he canvassed the countryside he was assailed by bitter opponents who threatened his life and undermined his message, but undeterred, he made hundreds and thousands of converts.

Whether St. Patrick was speaking to local pagans who knew nothing of the Christian faith, or to neophytes, newly-baptized disciples who were not well-grounded in the truths of the faith, he was faced with the daunting task of

explaining profound mysteries such as the Trinity which are so difficult to understand.

Father Michael goes on to tell some of the legends about how St. Patrick taught the concept of the Trinity:

There are several popular legends about how St. Patrick used the shamrock to explain the mystery of the Trinity. According to one story, St. Patrick went to Connaught where he met two of King Laoghaire's daughters, Ethne and Fedelm. St. Patrick had been unable to persuade the king to convert, but he convinced the king's daughters. During their time of instruction St. Patrick used a shamrock to visualize the mystery of the Trinity, how a single plant with three leaves is analogous to the one Triune God with three separate and distinct Persons.

...

According to [another] legend, St. Patrick was travelling and happened upon a number of Irish chieftains along a meadow. The tribal leaders were curious about the Trinity and asked St. Patrick for an explanation. So he bent down, picked a shamrock, and showed it to them, and explained how the three leaves are part of the one plant, and how similarly the three Persons, Father, Son, and Spirit, are part of one Supreme Being.

St. Patrick was trying to do a difficult thing - explain how three things that you can't see are all part of one thing that you also can't see.

If you want a tastier example that you can actually hold in your hand (since shamrocks are pretty rare around here), consider the pretzel.

One popular story is that pretzels were invented around 610 A.D. by a monk who wanted to find a use for leftover scraps of dough. He twisted a length of dough

and formed the pretzel's iconic shape, which was meant to resemble crossed arms. The pretzel's three holes are said to represent the Holy Trinity.

Not a very convincing story, I don't think, but again, people are trying to explain a difficult concept in simple terms.

We're just going to have to accept that the Scriptural references to the Trinity are, in fact, the answer. Since it's nothing we can see, we will have to see without believing, this time at least.

We looked at the story of Jesus' baptism last week.

Matthew chapter 3 verses 13 - 16 say:

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 14 But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

15 Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

16 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

So the Spirit was described here as the Spirit of God, meaning a Spirit that was part of God. The Spirit descended from heaven, and alighted on Jesus. And then, as we read last week, God said "This is my Son, whom I love."

That's the moment when the idea of the relationship gets cemented – that Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the Son of God, and that God's Spirit alighted on Jesus – the same Spirit foretold by Isaiah.

In our reading from I Corinthians this morning, we heard:

4 There are different kinds of gifts. But they are all given to believers by the same Spirit. 5 There are different ways to serve. But they all come from the same Lord. 6 There are different ways the Spirit works. But the same God is working in all these ways and in all people.

The Spirit gives gifts to the believers. The various ways to serve all come from the same LORD. There are different ways the Spirit works – but the same God is working in all these ways.

The Spirit is clearly of God, not just from God. It is God's Holy Spirit – a part of God, not just a gift from God. In the same way that Jesus and God are one, the Spirit and God are also one.

Judaism maintains a tradition of monotheism that excludes the possibility of a Trinity. In Judaism, God is understood to be the absolute one, indivisible, and incomparable being which is the ultimate cause of all existence.

Islam considers Jesus to be a prophet, but not divine, and God to be absolutely indivisible

So is it our belief in a triune God the thing that sets Christians apart from others?

You might be surprised at how many modern-day religious denominations that do believe in Christ are not, in fact, Trinitarian in their beliefs.

Modern nontrinitarian groups or denominations include Christadelphians, Christian Science, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Dawn Bible Students, Iglesia ni Cristo, Jehovah's Witnesses, Living Church of God, Members Church of God International, Oneness Pentecostals, the Seventh Day Church of God, Unitarian Christians, United Church of God, and The Shepherd's Chapel.

For one example, Unitarianism (from Latin *unitas* 'unity, oneness') is a nontrinitarian branch of Christianity. Unitarian Christians affirm the unitary nature of God as the singular and unique creator of the universe, believe that Jesus Christ was inspired by God in his moral teachings and that he is the Saviour of humankind, but he is not equal to God himself.

And their belief about the Spirit is similar - a gift from God, but not an equal part of God.

Unitarianism started around the time of the Reformation that created the Protestant denominations we know today - a number of which later joined here in our country to create what we now know as the United Church of Canada.

But Unitarians took a different path, and although that path is different, they are still considered to be a collection of Christian denominations. As an offshoot themselves, they have offshoots of their belief system as well, notably Unitarian Universalism (called UUism for short).

UUism is a liberal religious movement characterized by a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning". Unitarian Universalists assert no creed, but instead are unified by their shared search for spiritual growth. Unitarian Universalists do not have an official, unified corpus of sacred texts but rather draw inspiration and guidance from the six sources: personal experience, prophetic utterances, world religions, Jewish and Christian teachings, humanist teachings, and spiritual teachings. Unitarian Universalist congregations include

many atheists, agnostics, deists, and theists; there are churches, fellowships, congregations, and societies around the world.

In the United States, the Unitarian movement began primarily in the Congregational parish churches of New England, which were part of the state church of Massachusetts. These churches trace their roots to the division of the Puritan colonies into parishes for the administration of their religious needs. In the late 18th century, conflict grew within some of these churches between Unitarian and Trinitarian factions. The American Unitarian Association was founded as a separate denomination in 1825

In the 19th century, under the influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson (who had been a Unitarian minister) and other transcendentalists, Unitarianism began its long journey from liberal Protestantism to its more pluralist form.

So we wouldn't classify them as Christian - although they do believe the teachings of Jesus Christ are of value. They do deny his Godhood.

However, a lot of their language and especially their songs is not incompatible with what we believe, especially about the Spirit. Because Universalists don't really have a defined creed or texts, they lack a definite story about how what is around us came to be and continues to exist - the concept of a Spirit that is in and around all living things fits the bill nicely. Although it isn't the Spirit we speak of as a part of the Trinity, it is implied (although not explicitly stated) that the Spirit is a part of everything in and around us, and that fits into many non-Christians' belief system as an explanation of the world, and is in some ways analogous to pantheism.

We frequently sing the hymn Spirit of Life (and we'll close our service this morning with that song) but you may not realize it was written by a Unitarian, for a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

Raised Southern Baptist, Carolyn McDade joined the Unitarian Church of Austin, Texas, in the 1950s, and was active at the Arlington Street Church in Boston in the 1960s. She has been involved in Unitarian Universalist ministry but today she self-identifies as non-denominational woman of faith; her community is a loose community of women.

The song has become the most sung piece of music by Unitarian and Universalist congregations, but has found a much wider audience and has been embraced by many denominations.

Only the first verse we'll sing today was written by McDade:

Spirit of Life, come unto me.
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea;
Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.
Roots hold me close; wings set me free;
Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

Think how that aligns with Unitarian beliefs, but also aligns with our post-Pentecost view of the Spirit as an equal element of the Triune God.

McDade has been asked about this, and her response is essentially that if it works for you, then it was meant for you.

The song was short, however, and it wasn't long before several people tried their hand at extending it, wanting to share more fully in the beauty of the song and the feelings it evoked.

McDade originally very much resented these alterations to her song – she felt that it was complete as she wrote it, and should be sung exactly that way.

UU members had written several additional verses to sing in their churches. McDade asked them to stop. “My feeling was, you need to find your own melody. Don’t lose what you want to sing, but find a way to make it yours.” she said.

However, after a number of years, she relented a bit. She realized how beloved the song had become, and how the additional verses meant something special to the singers in the same way her original verse had meant to her. In general, she believes it’s important to let songs, once written, go out and have their own lives.

That’s where her more current philosophy has come from – because the song has expanded to provide meaning to people based on their personal context.

The second verse as we’ll sing it today was written by an unnamed author and published in a Unitarian Universalist hymn book.

The third and fourth verses are ones that I wrote 25 years ago, independently of the knowledge that any other verses existed, and not knowing McDade’s feelings at the time. The creation of what I called verses 2 and 3 came from that same feeling – that the song evoked an emotional reaction that helped us understand our world, our place in it, and in some ways, our purpose and mission.

We now sing those as verses 3 and 4.

I did try to write the two verses to be consistent with how a Unitarian might write them, so they would be a fitting extension of the original.

Spirit of God, be with me now.

Give to my works all the power of your blessing.

Flow through my life, showing me how,

work in my heart, giving me the warmth of loving.

...

*Spirit of faith, help me to see.
Flash in my eyes understanding and conviction.
Brighten my days, fill up my nights,
Fill me with love, for myself, and for all people.
Roots hold me close; wings set me free;
Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.*

Even with its Unitarian roots, the song is perhaps one of the ones we sing most fervently about the Spirit.

Unlike the Unitarians who first sung it, for us, the Spirit means something different – a part of the Trinity, a part of God.

Despite many words people have tried to use to explain the Spirit, maybe this is the best way – to sing of the Spirit of Life, the Spirit of God, and the Spirit of Faith.

We feel the Spirit in our lives, and we see the Spirit in all things around us.

The beauty of creation reflects the Spirit, and the Spirit breathes life into our innermost thoughts.

And we can sum this up by saying “Thanks Be to God.”

AMEN.