

May 20, 2018
Pentecost, Promised & Delivered
Annette Hill Briggs
John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

²⁶ “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. ²⁷ You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

[The Work of the Spirit]

^{4b} “I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. ⁵ But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ ⁶ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. ⁷ Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸ And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ about sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰ about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; ¹¹ about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

¹² “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

To this relationship between God and the human which we call Christian, each brings their own part. God brings the Christ event and all the accoutrements therein: the grace, most of all; the everlasting life; the capacity for contentment and fearlessness; and, for today's purposes, the Holy Spirit – also called *Advocate* or *Counselor*. Which both have the ring of *lawyer*. I like to think if the word had existed then, Bible translators might have called the Holy Spirit “*coach*.” Anyway, God brings the Christ event, including the Holy Spirit. And we bring faith.

Now I want to tell you a story. About how my brother-in-law Guy Briggs used to take us out for dinner. Except we called it supper, of course. Guy was 18 months younger than Carl. He had Down syndrome and lived at home with his parents his whole life. He died when he was 33. His whole adult life he was 4'11" and weighed 285 pounds. Proudly! He had about a hundred quirks, habits, hobbies and collections – and a bank account,

because he worked full-time after graduating high school, which he was not shy to gloat about to his forever-in-school brother.

In Guy's closet was a briefcase, and in the briefcase were years-and-years' worth of birthday cards, all with money in them, because Guy had no use for birthday cards without money in them. \$1's and \$5's and his favorite, \$10 bills. About once a month Guy would get the case from the closet, the cards from the case, and the money from the cards, and put it in his wallet. The kind of wallet with a chain that attached to his belt. *Like a Harley man*, he said. He'd take his wallet in the living room and say, "*I wan' take Mama and Daddy out for supper.*" Always to either Shoney's or Bonanza.

Except, at Bonanza or Shoney's the money never came back out of the Harley wallet. Everybody ate. Daddy, Cecil, paid. We'd go home. Guy put all the money back in all the cards, put the cards back in the briefcase, put the briefcase back in the closet. And no one said a word... until next month when they, or we, would all go to supper again on that same \$87.

Which is a silly way of saying: this faith we carry in our pockets, this faith we think makes us Christian, this faith we think we spend to feed ourselves and others – it may seem like something we did, or something we earned, or something we spend to gain whatever blessings we claim. And maybe the Lord watches us and thinks the same generous, kindly thoughts we think about the hobbies and habits of a mildly mentally handicapped man, when it's his daddy covering him the whole time. Just like Cecil Briggs at the Bonanza.

The Lord just plays along, letting us think that we are doing something grand, when the faith we claim is itself a gift of God. God has bankrolled both partners in the deal, and all that is ours to do is trust. For Pentecost, the lectionary circles back around to John 15 and 16, Jesus's promise of the Holy Spirit: the promise delivered now, these 50 days after Easter – a promise made deep into the farewell discourse. *Your hearts are filled with sorrow*, Jesus says, *so much so you cannot listen to me now, when there is so much left to say.*

Anxiety blocks learning. We know that, so surely Jesus did. Anxiety + grief = emotional paralysis, at a minimum – and even more pervasive results, depending on the trauma. Without Him, Jesus knew the disciples would fail. Fail hard. Jesus isn't about to leave them alone. Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. We live in the great meantime between the resurrection and his return. We'll never make it on our own.

I was up for children's sermon this week. I was going to bring my suitcase in, since it's in the car already. Mine is green and Carl's is blue. When the blue suitcase comes out at home, no one cares. But when the green one comes upstairs and is laid out on the bedroom floor, it's a different story. Golden Retriever Number 1, Rosie Cotton, lies beside it and sighs. Golden Retriever Number 2, Scout, paces the house and cries.

Here she is *[picture]* on the driveway this morning when I put the suitcase in the car. If you could hear her, you'd think her leg was in a trap. Now, I realize what is altogether

wrong with this image, since in it I am Jesus Christ and Carl Briggs is the Holy Spirit. But what is altogether right about this image is that we all get to be golden retrievers! We are all invited to trust Jesus in his promise that the Holy Spirit is coming and will be as real and as trustworthy as Carl Briggs always turns out to be when I leave town. Bringing me to the question I want to consider today: Is the Holy Spirit real?

You know those words people say that you don't really know the meaning of, but too much time went by and you didn't ask, so you just go along? Holy Spirit was one of those words for me, for a long time – something I thought everyone else had a better, clearer grasp of, than I did. *Pneuma* and *Ruah* – all the \$3 seminary words and biblical scholarship had lots to say to my brain, but not to my heart or my life. Does that make sense?

But when I poked at it a little, do you know what I discovered? Lots of folks were faking it, right along with me! Especially folks in our non-pentecostal, mainline protestant tradition. Still, the Holy Spirit is either real or it isn't. How do we know? By faith. Not by proof. Not by publication. By faith. We believe by faith, not proof. We can no more prove the Holy Spirit *isn't* real than that it is.

So, for me and you, if it's useful, here is my understanding of the Holy Spirit, after twenty-some years of thinking hard about it. I say *thinking*, but it's a work of life and heart and brain. I grew up around churchy people, so I heard about the *Holy Spirit* early and often. I got the idea he was like Jesus' spy, only nice – and very helpful so long as I behaved. If I didn't, HE (of course the Holy Spirit was *he*, *though the Bible does not say so*) would tell Jesus and I'd be in trouble. I almost NEVER got in trouble.

Later, like after I had been to seminary and had a baby and had seen a bit of the wideness of this world, I began to see that every person in this world is leaning on something, is guided by something: knowingly, unknowingly; a voice, a force, a philosophy, a memory; some perspective upon existence, some frame of reference to which they have tuned their heart and mind. People steeped in church and in scripture, especially if we have applied ourselves, learn a culture of spiritual life. Mine was rooted in the scripture, its stories, poetry, teaching and laws, and in the particular light by which the people I knew read it. All for better and for worse. All the scripture I know comes through the lens and work of imperfect human beings. It is smudged with their prejudice, fear, weakness, and good intentions.

The ways of God – justice, righteousness, grace – those ways became the ways of life the folks on the same path as me learned to want for ourselves. And for the world. The more we not only learn but actually feed on the ways of God in the scriptures, the more these ways become embedded in our thinking, in our feeling, in our view of the world, our judgments. They become the framework for how we make meaning of everything. Other people with other experience are sure to have entirely other perspective, to create entirely other culture. Or maybe, a very similar culture which they call by a different name than Christian.

Simultaneously as these ways embed in our thinking and feeling, we behave accordingly, as well – or intend to. Desire to. We call it *living by faith*, trusting in this system of God's ways without the kind of verification available to prove gravity. Over years and years of living by faith, of tuning one's whole self to what our tradition and culture has named the Holy Spirit, a life of stories is built that becomes a living, breathing REAL version of all that I believe, that we believe, that this life together has believed and pursued in faith.

Is it a mind game? Some think so. I don't. Or if it is, everyone is doing it. And we have a name for ours: life in Christ. Two things make it so difficult. One, our propensity for discontentment, always fearing we are missing something better. Second, it's really, really hard. It's really, really hard because all this time we are being raised in faith, we are also being raised in the world. If ALL I could hear in my heart and mind every waking hour and in my dreams were the voice of the Holy Spirit, my goodness, what a truckload of anxiety and grief could be saved!

But there are LOTS of voices in this head of mine. There's the "*You've worked so hard, you deserve a treat*" voice; and the "*Let's go buy something*" voice; and the "*You are a terrible preacher/mother/wife/friend*" voice; and the "*None of what you're doing matters, so why try harder?*" voice; and the "*Why aren't you a high school history teacher?*" voice; and the "*What if none of this stuff called faith means anything at all, and this really is just a game?*" voice. And on any given day all those voices can wear a person out. They can overwhelm the voice I mean to listen to.

Hearing, of course, demands listening. Which, again, is why Jesus couldn't say everything he wanted to. They were too upset to listen. And he didn't push them very much – extra hard – which I appreciate.

Anyway, my honest answer to the question is, "Yes. Yes, the Holy Spirit is real." The Holy Spirit is one name for the mysterious force in the universe by which I experience the goodness and the grace of God in this world. It comes to me in nature; it comes to me in books; it comes to me through other people, and sometimes in ways I can't explain at all.

Holy Spirit is the name I use for how Jesus comes to me like a real-time coach, pushing me to be braver, kinder, and freer; to be less fearful, less prideful, less greedy; to be more – more patient, more just, and more humble; to work out the mystery of this work of Christ in me called "salvation." I can't prove it. I can only tell you about it as I have tasted of it, learned it, and as I experience it.

Everybody is trusting in something, even if they call it nothing. Because *nothing* is still *something*, remember. And I have decided, at least on my best days, to trust Jesus' promise, and my experience, that God has not left us to fend for ourselves. The Spirit of God, given once in the Christ, is within and among us here and now, taking care of our lives and our life together, leading us as we do God's will in the world today.

Would you pray with me?