



Unity in the Trinity – Rev. Hedy Collver
John 17:20-26

Transcript

The first time that I ever heard anyone speak with any real depth of passion about the Holy Spirit was when I was in college. My friend, Kelly, who I had been friends with since I was 12 had recently become a Christian and when I went to visit her for the weekend at Syracuse University she said, “Do you want to come to church with me on Sunday?” I said, “Sure, of course!”

I had been to church many times growing up with friends of mine, but those were almost all Roman Catholic churches. Those services shaped my understanding of what church would be like. I knew that in the church parking lot everyone would very politely wave to each other, and then fall quietly into line as they went through the doors of the church. Everyone would go right down the aisle, and would do this little bow before stepping into the pew. As a kid I wasn’t quite sure what that was all about, but after doing this they would sit down and face front.

The priests would process into the sanctuary with their ornate robes, looking very, very solemn and serious. There would be beautiful, soft organ music playing and then the service would start. Everybody knew when to stand up, to sit down, to kneel, to sing. They knew the words of the prayers by heart. Everybody did it at the exact same time. The priest would give the homily — which would usually be quite short and then as soon as that was done they’d do Communion. Quick prayer at the end, and that was it. I thought that was what church was going to be like. It was beautiful, it was soft, it was calm, it was reflective.

That was what I expected when I went to Kelly’s church that Sunday morning. But as soon as we pulled into the parking lot, immediately I knew that something was different. People weren’t dressed in suits and dresses. They were just dressed like they were going around their normal day. They were animatedly talking to each other. They didn’t seem to be in a rush to head to the doors of the church. Then, when we walked through the doors of the church, I knew that something was really different because there was rock music playing over the speakers. That was not an organ I was hearing! We went into the sanctuary itself and it was kind of set up in a horseshoe. They didn’t have pews, they had just a lot of chairs. Again, people were talking to each other. They were all so very excited.

When the service started, the music was very energetic and really loud. The pastor got up and he wasn’t wearing a robe. There were several pastors on the platform, and when someone up there was praying, people responded. “Amen!” and “Yes, Lord!” When the preacher started talking, instead of everybody very seriously facing forward and just listening to what he was saying, they were still responding. First I heard an “Amen, brother!” Then an excited “Preach it!!” I wasn’t sure what to do with that either.

What really threw me was in the middle of the sermon when a woman raised her hand and said, "Preacher, I have a word of prophecy." Everyone turned towards her and listened to what she said. Now honestly I don't remember the words she spoke, but I remember that I thought it was just beautiful. When she was finished, everybody turned back to the preacher and he finished preaching. At some point during the sermon, a woman at the end of our row got up and started running laps around the gymnasium. I looked at my friend Kelly, with an expression that must have clearly communicated my confusion, as she explained, "It's okay. When she gets filled with the Holy Spirit she has to let it out somehow and so she runs."

That was my first experience of the Holy Spirit. Many years later I started to think about the Holy Spirit again. I had become a Christian, and was involved in a wonderful, supportive church. They didn't really talk about the Holy Spirit a lot unless it was in the context of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I don't remember hearing about who or what the Holy Spirit was.

The next time I was challenged to consider the Spirit in seminary when I took a class called "Worshiping the Trinity." In that class the professor was talking about the things that the Holy Spirit did. He spoke about how the Holy Spirit helped us to be able to read and interpret scripture. How the Holy Spirit gave us spiritual gifts when we believed in Christ. How the Holy Spirit would convict us of things in our lives that we were struggling with that were sins or errors – where we had veered away from God's will.

As the professor described the Holy Spirit, I kept thinking that it sounded a lot like the Holy Spirit was no more than a tool. Something that we would use. It sounded very pragmatic and utilitarian and functional.

I realized that I had been presented with two very, very different pictures of the Holy Spirit: one overwhelmingly wild, and the other boringly mild.

I accepted intellectually that the Holy Spirit was a part of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But I still wasn't entirely sure what that really meant. Then I was forced to deeply consider my understanding of what the Holy Spirit was again when I went through the ordination process. If there is one question you can be sure that the Board of Ordained Ministry is going to ask you is: how does the Holy Spirit impact your ministry?

I started researching what exactly is it that the Holy Spirit is. What does it do? Why is it a part of the Trinity? How does it relate to the Father and the Son? I figured that the best place to start with this research was to begin with the one person who truly *knew* who the Holy Spirit was and that, of course, is Jesus. I looked through scripture for what Jesus taught about the Holy Spirit. Today we're going to be really quickly looking through some of his words about the Holy Spirit from the Gospel of John.

We're starting with John 14, verses 16 through 17: "I will ask the Father and he will give you another advocate who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit who leads into all truth. The world cannot receive him because it isn't looking for him and doesn't recognize him; but you know him because he lives with you now and later will be in you."

Throughout chapters 1 through 13, John uses the word *pneuma* – breath or wind – to talk about the Holy Spirit. This is the first time that Jesus is using a very specific Greek word *parakletos*. The verb *parakaleo* means to exhort and to encourage, to comfort and console, to come alongside, to give aid. The *parakletos* – the Holy Spirit here – is then the one who encourages, the one who exhorts, the one who comforts, the one who counsels, the one who comes alongside of us to help. That is a lot to get into just one word! When we're translating a complex word like *parakletos* into English we have to choose one word. Our various English translations handle it differently. The *New International Version* calls *parakletos* "Counselor." The *New Revised Standard Version*: "Advocate." The *English Standard Version*: "Helper." The *King James Version*: "Comforter." Those are wonderful translations. The *parakletos*, the Holy Spirit, is our Comforter, our Encourager, our Exhorter, our Helper.

But look at what Jesus says in verse 16: "He will give you another advocate." Another *parakletos*. In 1 John 2:1, John writes this: "My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin we have an advocate [a *parakletos*] who pleads our case before the father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous."

Jesus was and is our advocate, our *parakletos*. Jesus is now saying to his disciples that I will send you another advocate, another *parakletos*. The New Interpreters Bible puts it this way, "A paraclete is thus not simply just another name for the Spirit but it is a particular way of describing the functions of the Spirit, functions held in common with Jesus. What the paraclete does is not new but is a continuation of the work of Jesus."

This is affirmed by two things that Jesus says in chapter 14 and 15. First, this is verse 26 from Chapter 14, "When the Father sends the advocate as my representative, that is the Holy Spirit, he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you." Then chapter 15 verse 26: "I will send you the advocate, the Spirit of Truth. He will come to you from the Father and will testify all about me."

It is really easy for us to get hung up on this trying to attempt to understand the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. How, we want to understand, how can God be one and yet God is three? How can God be a total unity and yet be three persons? How can God be both one and three? We've come up with all sorts of ways to be able to understand this but the truth is it is really hard for us to see because there is nothing exactly like the Trinity in all of creation.

There is something that we can understand about the Trinity. We can understand its purpose, its direction. Why does Jesus want us to receive the Holy Spirit? What is the Holy Spirit's purpose in our lives?

The purpose and direction of the Holy Spirit... is the purpose and direction of the Trinity. It always has been and always will be. The Trinity — our God the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit — all created this amazing universe. Together they created everything that is, created you and me. The Trinity created us to be in perfect, good, healthy relationship with God and with each other. Well, we messed that up, so God knew that we needed something else. Jesus was willing

to come to earth to be a human being, to walk among us. *The Word took on flesh and dwelt among us* in order to help us to have a good and healthy relationship with God, a good and healthy relationship with each other. The purpose and direction of the Holy Spirit is that very same thing: to call us into a good and healthy relationship with God and with each other. To help us to love our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. In short: the Holy Spirit is available *to us* in order to complete Christ's work *in us*.

Then there's a statement in Chapter 16 that must have shocked the disciples when they heard it. This is verse 7: *"But in fact it is best for you that I go away because if I don't the advocate won't come. If I do go away then I will send him to you."* Can you imagine what that must have been like for those disciples to hear Jesus say, *"But it is best for you if I go away"*? I want you to imagine the person who you love and cherish most in the world standing in front of you and saying, "It is better for you if I am not here. It is better if I go away, if I am no longer physically available to you." How would you feel? Jesus' disciples had invested everything in Jesus. They had left behind everything that they knew. They've followed him, trusted in him as their messiah. And he told them, *"It is best for you if I go away."*

That would be a really hard thing to understand, wouldn't it? I don't know about you, but I thought many times how wonderful it would be to have Jesus actually walking by me, guiding me, telling me where to go and what to do. Often when I pray, I picture myself sitting at the feet of Jesus, telling him what's happening in my life and listening for his wisdom. Having Jesus physically present would have been so important to those disciples. But Jesus says to them, *"It is better for you if I go away."* Why does he say this?

Jesus knows that because of the very nature of his gift to us, coming into human form, that he has become location- and time-limited. It was a part of his gift to us that he became a human being who was defined by the edges of his own flesh. He knew that as long as he was present on the earth the disciples would look to him, but that if he was with them he couldn't be with others. His human reach was finite. So the infinite, all-powerful, everywhere God wanted to give us the gift of an infinite, everywhere, all-powerful Spirit that would be with us every moment of our lives. Not just with me, not just with you, but available to every person on the earth. What an incredible gift from God.

And, yet, somehow we don't always avail ourselves of this gift, do we? I think there's something in us, especially in mainline churches, that are a little bit afraid of what the Holy Spirit might do if we let him in. We're afraid that maybe we might start doing things that we wouldn't usually do or saying things that we wouldn't usually say. I don't believe that is how the Holy Spirit works. God created each and every one of us. Knows us intimately. The Holy Spirit wants to be able to free us from the things that hold us back. To give us joy in the midst of all of our circumstances. To give us courage to be God's hands and feet in the world. To stretch our faith in beautiful ways and to grow strength in us to do more than we ever could before. God knows that we need an Encourager. We need an Exhorter. We need a Comforter. We need a Counselor. We need someone to come alongside us and to love us.

We should never be afraid to have too much of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We *should* be afraid of not having enough! Because it is through the Holy Spirit that we are invited into direct relationship with the Trinity itself. Jesus says this in John 17:20 from our reading today: *“I am praying not only for these disciples, but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one just as you and I are one. As you are in me and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe that you sent me.”*

I pray today that we would all be filled to overflowing with the Holy Spirit. That our very words and actions out in the world would demonstrate how deeply loved all people are by God. Each and every day we have opportunities to do that, and we can with the strength and wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit. I pray that that would be true in your life and in mine as well. I offer this to you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.