

This morning we continue our series on the Nicene Creed by considering the work of the Holy Spirit.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.

The church fathers who created the Nicene Creed were very concerned about the relationship between the persons of the Trinity. At the time, you will remember, the church was gripped by a controversy about whether Jesus was fully God and fully human. It was important to the church fathers to emphasize that all the persons of the Trinity are equally God. That's why it says "the Lord the Giver of Life... Who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified."

"Who proceeds from the Father" is strange language to our ears. The idea is that God the 'Father' is the one who has no origin and out of him came forth the Word and Spirit. The supreme example of God's innate creativity is the differentiation of the Godhead into three persons. The Holy Spirit came forth or proceeded from God the Creator.

During the 11th century, the Christian churches of the East centered in Constantinople separated from the Churches of the West centered in Rome. As we see today where there are religious conflicts such as the Protestant/Catholic antagonism in Northern Ireland, the Muslim/Christian violence in Nigeria or even the Shiite/Sunni war erupting in the Middle East, the apparently religious disputes mask socio-political and historic reasons for the conflict. This was true in the 11th century too; the religious issues that covered the cultural and linguistic differences that led to the Great Schism included whether to use leavened or unleavened bread for the Eucharist, the role of the Pope, and whether the Holy Spirit came forth, or "proceeded" just from the Father or from the Father and Son together.

The original creed just said Father. The addition of "and the son" started at a synod on Toledo, Spain in the sixth century and spread through the Western churches until by the 11th century it was normal in the part of the church under the Pope of Rome to say that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son. In 1994, The Episcopal Church declared its intention of returning to the original theology and usage; we plan to leave out "and the Son" in its next revision of the Book of Common Prayer.

By the time of the great 13th Century Roman Catholic theologian, Thomas Aquinas, the philosophical speculation about the nature of God had been almost completely divorced from the actions of the Godhead in creation, in the incarnation of Christ, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But since then, the church has turned its attention more to God's plan in relation to humanity and the vexed questions of exactly how the Trinity relates within the Godhead are perhaps not so important for contemporary Christians.

Today we have a new task because we have new understandings of the universe. Now we see that God did not stop on the sixth day when he had created the earth and all that dwells thereon and declared it good. The universe is continuing to expand and to evolve. God is active beyond the wildness imaginations of the 4th century or the 14th century church. It is up to us to draw on the scriptural witness, the theological traditions of both East and West and contemporary cosmology to describe the Trinity and particularly the Holy Spirit in a new way.

The Holy Spirit is God active in creation, in the words of the prophets calling us back to the path of God, in the activities of the Body of Christ, the Church, and in our individual hearts, teaching us and prompting us and making us more and more Christ-like.

The Bible often does not clearly differentiate the Holy Spirit from God the Creator. It's a little difficult because Greek and Hebrew do not use capital letters in the same way as we do, and the word for spirit is the same as the word for breath. For example, the first story of Creation tells us that "In the beginning when God created the

heavens and the earth, 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.” (Gen 1: 1) Was it a wind from God or the Spirit of God? They are the same in Hebrew.

It makes most sense for us to think about the Holy Spirit as the way God is active in our lives and in the whole of creation. As we move away from the image of God as a white man with a beard sitting on a cloud, as we begin to imagine God more as the creative and generative force that gives energy to the atom and which moves in and among all created beings, so our underlying sense of God is one of energy, of spirit, of wind, of subtle movement.

I often talk of us as co-creators with God. God is on a mission to reconcile all of creation to God’s self. This redemption of the cosmos is not an afterthought but part of God’s plan from the very beginning. We are made in God’s image and we are too are extraordinarily creative. If we just think for a few moments of the technological changes that have happened in our lifetimes and of the new foods, products and activities that are being introduced every day we can see that humanity is always creating.

Every new thing starts with thought. Thought is creative. The way we think about ourselves and about our world leads to attitudes and actions which have results. We may not be creative in an arts and crafts kind of way, but by our thoughts and our attitudes we are constantly creating the world around us. All of us know people who make us feel better when we’re with them and people who don’t. The difference is in the thoughts and attitudes they are creating.

We have free will which means that we can create as we wish. We can create positively or we can create negatively. Those of us who are enrolled in the reign of God are called to be co-creators with God – to use our abundant creativity to co-operate with the Holy Spirit and to engage in God’s mission of reconciliation. This is an extraordinary honor; to be participants in God’s work, yet it is our calling. If we are uncertain about whether we are co-creating, and are having difficulty hearing the prompting of the Holy Spirit above the loud voices of our own little egos, then the list Paul gives in Galatians of the fruit of the Spirit is a helpful guide: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control; against such things there is no law.” (Gal 5:22,23) The more that these qualities are showing in our lives, the more we are truly co-creating with God.

Which brings me to a second place that we see the Holy Spirit is at work – in the life of the church and of the individual believer. Each one of us is a work in process. The church is a work in process. It is the Holy Spirit who works with us to make us more Christ-like, the process of faith formation and development which is known as “sanctification” or being made holy. We are called to be active participants in this process, listening to the prompting of the Holy Spirit; having the humility to see where we are failing to follow the path of Jesus, and being prepared to make the necessary changes. This is not easy for us because our little egos constantly want to have our own way and they are subtle enough to fool us into thinking we are becoming more holy when we are not. Jesus laughed at the hypocrites of his time who were so proud of their spirituality. To be proud of one’s own spiritual accomplishment is a sure sign that the ego is involved.

Yet as we choose to surrender to the Holy Spirit, as we choose to become more Christ-like and as we pray for guidance in the process of transformation, the Holy Spirit works miracles in our hearts and minds. It is the Holy Spirit who teaches us to pray. He is the Mr. Fixit of the spiritual world.

We usually use the masculine pronoun for the Holy Spirit, but he is no more male than God the Creator is male. The binary categories of male/female simply do not apply to God. In recent years some people have chosen to think of the Holy Spirit as female. They base this on the fact that in Greek most nouns that end in ‘a’ are female, and the Greek word for spirit is *pneuma*. However, there is another category of nouns that also end in ‘a’ which are neutral gender. It is no more correct to call the Holy Spirit “she” than it is to call her “he” but even though it is our only grammatically correct alternative, to call God “it” is just plain rude.

The Creed tells us specifically that the Holy Spirit has spoken through the prophets. It is our understanding that God continually called his people back to Godself through the words and actions of the prophets of Israel. But it doesn't stop there. As a recent advertising campaign of the United Church of Christ emphasized, "God is still speaking."

The Holy Spirit speaks to us in many ways but a primary one is through Scripture. Scripture was inspired by the Holy Spirit. I don't mean that he/she dictated the whole thing word for word, but that as the people of God sang hymns and told the stories of their encounters with the divine, and as those stories and songs were edited into the form we have today, the Holy Spirit was active in guiding each person.

Today the Holy Spirit is an important partner in our understanding of Scripture. We might think of a triangle of interpretation. We have the written word, we have our own intelligence and we have the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. I'm sure you've seen the bumper sticker, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." This suggests that God's word written, the Bible has definitive statements which don't need any interpretation. If there were indeed only one possible interpretation of the Scriptures which was good for all people for all time then there would be no need for the Holy Spirit to be involved. But that's not the case. When I read the Scriptures and seek to apply them to my own life, the insights I need are different from the ones you need, even if we are reading the same passage on the same day.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to inspire our reading and our understanding. That is what makes scripture a living word for us – the interpretative triangle where we bring our own intelligence and knowledge to our reading while listening for the promptings of the Holy Spirit to help us to deeper understandings – ones which will help us in the work of becoming Christ-like and of co-creating with God.

If Jesus had remained on this earth after his resurrection he would have become an anachronism, tied as he was to time and place. Before his ascension, he told the disciples that we would not leave them comfortless but would send them the Spirit of God. In fact, he said that he had to go in order for the Holy Spirit to come to them. Perhaps we can best think of the Holy Spirit as God-to-go, the person of the Trinity who is always active in and around us and who always support our turning towards God and our becoming more and more Christ-like so that we can play our full part in the redemption of creation.