

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia
29 May 2011**

*Easter 6A: 17:22-31; Ps 66:7-18;
1 Pet 3:13-22; Jn 14:15-21*

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A few weeks ago I went into the Acme on my way home after leaving church on a Sunday. I was stopped in the aisle by man's voice—"Hey, are you a pastor?" He could plainly see that I was, since I was still wearing my collar. "Yes, I am," I said in as even a tone as I could muster, since I didn't have a clue what the man needed.

"So what is the Holy Spirit?" he asked me. And of course, I went blank. All I could think of was what aisle am I in. I had just passed canned vegetables, and was heading in between beans and tomato sauce. "I mean, I understand the Father—that's God—and then there's the Son—that's Jesus. But what is the Holy Spirit? And is that the same as the Holy Ghost?"

I really only wanted to concentrate on what I needed for my early dinner. Chicken? Pork chops? Or the usual cheapest available steak? Just get me down this aisle and away from having to play "Explain That Doctrine In Twenty-five Words Or Less." But no, this was the consequence of wearing a piece of white plastic around my neck. This was the result of all that discernment, all that training, all that prayer. If I was going to write "The Rev." before my name, I had to be ready for any situation, including random theological questions next to Bush's Baked Beans and Cento Artichoke Hearts.

I don't remember what I said. Whatever it was was obviously inadequate, because the man thanked me with a patronizing, polite smile and apologized for taking up my time. Part of me wanted to call him back—"Wait, wait, I know this one! I actually wrote a paper on it." But then I realized that I didn't really aspire to be a supermarket theologian. If I failed to explain in two minutes what men and women have tried to puzzle out in hundreds of weighty tomes over the course of two thousand years—well, that was certainly not going to be my most significant failure.

I know I've been giving the writer of John's gospel a hard time over the past few weeks, talking to you about how the passages we've heard stem from a conflicted, sectarian context. That context is responsible for the supremely confident—some might say borderline arrogant—mode of expression that the Jesus of John's gospel uses.

But there are also some beautiful and powerful aspects of John's gospel that the other gospels do not demonstrate, and one of them is the explanation of the Holy Spirit. In today's passage John tells us that the Holy Spirit is "the Spirit of truth." He tells us that we know him because he abides with us, and he will be in us. The Holy Spirit not only continues the active presence of Christ in our lives, but brings together within us the combined energy of the Father and of Jesus Christ the Son. The Holy Spirit combines the presence of the Father and the Son at the center of our being, each of us, in a continuous and luminous swirl of love.

Two or three years ago, my sister-in-law lost her best friend to brain cancer. They'd been roommates in college and had been each other's best friend continuously ever since. When I sent her a condolence e-mail the answer I got back was remarkably frank for someone in my rather stoic family. My sister-in-law was hurting, and she didn't mind letting me know. Time to practice my pastoral skills, I thought. I wrote back a

lengthy message saying that in my view her friend, even though gone in the body, still very much lived in spirit. Obviously, she lived in the two children she raised successfully to adulthood. But also, I insisted, she lived in my sister-in-law. Think about it, I said: you're not the same person you would have been if you'd never had this friendship. For as long as you live you'll have her inside you. You'll have some experience and think to yourself, 'She would really have loved this.' Or you'll meet somebody with a particular set of flaws and think, 'Boy, would she ever have thought this guy was a jerk.'

I'm not talking about memories here. I'm talking about living in part as ourselves and living in part with someone else's voice, someone else's perspective, someone else's values inside of us, existing side by side with our own.

That's what I think Jesus is telling his disciples will happen to them. He is saying that the love he has for them, the love they have for him, the love the Father has for him, and the love he has for the Father are all wonderfully woven together in an active, energetic presence that will reside inside each of them. "You will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

The Gospel of John is the primary source for that idea of an intimate relationship with God, with the power of God, so powerful that we are inhabited by God's spirit, just as we channel a person to whom we've grown close and intimate. "I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."

The driving force of this spiritual presence is love: God's love for us, our love for God through Jesus Christ. It is a love that is as passionate and persistent as any human love we can imagine. It is a love that, if we allow it to, can sustain us, empower us, console us, give us whatever strength we think we need to get through what we have to get through. Remember that the word spirit in both Greek and Hebrew means breath, and the love of God takes the form of Holy Spirit, an energy that literally gives us the breath we need to live the full and loving lives that God intends for us. As Paul says in Acts, God "himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things," and it is in God that "we live and move and have our being."

If we accept the relationship of intimate love with God that God offers, God's presence in our hearts—and not only in our hearts, but in our lungs and our muscles and our nervous systems—can accomplish wonders of empowerment, encouragement, advocacy, and counseling and consolation. Through the Holy Spirit God's love working in us, as the letter to the Ephesians says, "can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine." It can in fact achieve no less than the transformation of our lives. That is why in the Nicene Creed we call the Holy Spirit "the Lord, the giver of life."

This transformation, this utterly changed relationship between us and God, between us and the rest of the world, is the reason we meet like this. This is not a weekly visit to the Jesus-doctor, where a bunch of established rituals somehow accomplish a set result. We meet here to listen, to speak, sometimes to sing, and to pray—in other words we meet here to breathe in a special kind of breath, a particular form of oxygen. We meet here to take in the life-giving, love-bearing breath of the Holy Spirit, who abides in us forever, who engages us, for as long as we draw breath, in God's great dance of love.