

A New Creed Part III

Years ago when I was enrolled in a graduate program in Political Science, I recall a conversation I had with one of my professors when I was discerning whether or not to leave the program in order to study Divinity and seek ordination. My professor expressed concern with the wisdom of my decision and wondered if there would really be any future for me with this kind of career choice. He himself was a religious man who regularly attended church, but he said to me, "People don't seem very interested in religion these days, although they do like to think they are spiritual."

I have to say that I knew what he was talking about when offered me that little bit of advice. I had heard and still to this day hear many people declare that they are "Spiritual but not religious." -Although sometimes I wonder if some who say this actually know what it is to be spiritual? To what spirits are they referring? And what are they doing to nurture and grow in their spirituality? After all, we live in a world that is full of different kinds of spirits. As the apostle Paul mentions in his letter to the Romans the world is filled with different powers and principalities. There are ideologies and other forces. Jesus himself faced opposition from and identified on occasion the presence of other powers and spirits at work. In fact, Jesus' ability to distinguish these different spirits that opposed him contributed to his unique identity and ministry.

I wonder how easy it is for us at time to name and distinguish some of the different powers and forces at work in our own day to day lives? When we say we are spiritual, to what

spirit or spirits are we referring? What are some of the spirits we identify with? Can we describe them?

Some spirits are easier for us to name than others. We talk about things like national spirit, school spirit and team spirit. Yet then there are other spirits that we might not always think of naming as being spiritual. For example, I believe that many of the spirits that we encounter in this world can be easily identified because they bear the suffix "I-S-M" or "ism." Our world is full of isms. Isms like "nationalism," "environmentalism," "capitalism," "communism," "racism," "individualism," "liberalism," "conservatism," "consumerism" and so on. These "isms" have the ability to direct our behavior, invest our hopes, reveal our politics and distinguish ourselves from others. They certainly have a spiritual dimension. There is a great deal of power meted out by the "isms" of this world. Consider "fanaticism" which is also related to the word fan. Now that playoff season is upon us in the NHL and the NBA this is another "ism" we perhaps see more readily. At this time of year, it is not uncommon to see the occasional fan who paints his face, don the jersey of his favourite sports team and cheer at the top of his lungs during a big game. This is fanaticism -at its best or at its worst, depending on your perspective.

Yes, there are many spirits at work in this world. Spirits that can unite us with like minded people -people who cheer for the same side, share the same spirit, the same desire and passion. Ones who speak the same language as us. These spirits can also divide and separate us from others. The spirits we chase after can cause us to exclude others and we use them to differentiate ourselves.

Yet the Spirit that we speak of when we consider the Christian faith is not an “ism.” It’s not a matter of politics or preference. It is not a spirit meant to exclude. Nor is it something we chase after for ourselves as our own personal possession or work. You see, when it comes to the “isms” in life the focus tends to be on the “us” side of things. When it comes to the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit as we often name her, this is a spirit that as “A New Creed” puts it, is one that is at work in us *and* others. It is bestowed upon us and others by God as a gift. Although we as Christians may lay claim to the Spirit as an exclusive possession and although through history it has been manipulated and distorted by all sorts of isms including fanaticism, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of Pentecost is a gift given to us ones like us and to others who may or may not be like us. This is something this text that Gwen read for us this morning from the Book of Acts makes abundantly clear.

Acts Chapter 2 begins with the disciples waiting in a room together to receive the Spirit that Jesus had promised them. The same room where they had shared their last supper together. It comes at a time when Jesus was no longer with them in bodily form. One can only imagine what was going through the disciples minds at that time. A time when they were no doubt wondering, “Okay, Jesus is gone, what’s going to happen to us?” The focus for the disciples was on the “us” side of things.

But the Spirit comes. It enters like the rush of wind, like a powerful moment of inspiration. It descends from above as a gift from God -this is the graciousness of the Spirit of which we speak. Further, not only does the Spirit come and visit upon the first disciples, but also upon the others who were gathered in Jerusalem at that time. It was a Spirit that moved the disciples out of the place of “us”, to instead see a Spirit that was “in us and others.” What

the disciples finally perceived was that the Spirit of Christ, was not just something that was for them, it was at work in the world in the lives of many, in different languages and nationalities. This was where they were to see God at work. This was the Spirit Jesus had been full of during his ministry.

You see, many of those in whom the disciples saw and heard the Spirit at work in that moment, were ones who had probably never met Jesus, they certainly weren't from Galilee like the disciples were. They spoke different languages had different accents, but that didn't mean that God wasn't at work in them -that the Holy Spirit wasn't present in these others too. To hear others in their own language reveals a Spirit of understanding. This is a spirit that seeks to understand others. It a spirit that seeks to unite. It was this Spirit of understanding that would eventually allow those first disciples to share the gospel of Christ. I believe that this is an important distinction that we make as Christians when we consider what kind of Spirit we talk about. Yes, we do talk about the unique Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of Jesus that enabled him to be such a special, loving, and compassionate human being who was very understanding of others. Yet this Spirit is not exclusive to me or us.

However, as many of us know, in the Christian tradition, there have been ones who have tried over the ages to use the Spirit as a way to exclude. Charismatic churches for example have often tried to put rules and restrictions on the Spirit - you only have the Spirit if you speak in tongues or get excited and wave your arms in church; you only possess the Spirit if you have a certain kind of "born again" experience. This usually leads to a feeling of spiritual superiority, as if to say "I have the Holy Spirit and you don't." On the other hand, some of the more liberal churches have tended to be indifferent to the Spirit, or they have a feeling of

spiritual inferiority. They assume the Holy Spirit is reserved for other people who are blessed with greater spiritual gifts. It's as if they downgrade themselves as second-class Christians and say, "That kind of experience of God just isn't meant for me."

Yet the Spirit...the Holy Spirit...is at work in us and others because the Holy Spirit belongs to God and not to us. The Holy Spirit is part of God and is therefore not subject to the limitations we or any religion or competing spirituality try to place on God. This is why as Christians we should even be able to identify the ways in which the Spirit is at work not only in themselves and other Christians but also in people of other faiths. I believe it's a falsehood to say we do not see the Spirit at work in other faiths. To do this is to claim the kind "holier than thou" attitude that Jesus sought to expose and do away with. For example, consider the work of Mahatma Gandhi. He may not have been a Christian, yet he was certainly a man in whom any one of us could easily see at work the same Spirit that was in Christ.

To acknowledge the Spirit that is at work in us and others is to believe that we can overcome the barriers that the many "isms" in this world often erect. We appreciate that God has a larger claim on this world than the one we can often make for ourselves. A life shared in the Spirit is something that should allow for multi-faith dialogue because we acknowledge this divine presence in one another's traditions. As St. Francis put it in his famous prayer, it is a spirit that calls us to understand others rather than that we ourselves seek to be understood. We seek to understand others and how the Spirit may be speaking and working through them and through their traditions. For ultimately it is this gift of understanding others that leads to the deepening of human relationships. Imagine if everyone in the world embraced a Spirit where they sought to understand others, instead of always feeling misunderstood or needing to be

understood. By the Spirit we come to better understand ourselves, others and God. It's not all about us...it's not all up to us. It is a Spirit that works in us and others...for us and others.

It is a Spirit that the Bible describes as being a "counselor", "helper", encourager, advocate, or "comforter" -attributes that almost any human can understand and appreciate, no matter what language they speak or culture they come from. It's like the story I read from years ago, when the Bible society was translating the Bible into the Karre dialect of the people who live in the Central African Republic and parts of Cameroon. The translator wondered what word he would use to translate a word used to describe the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John.

The translator came across a local who showed him how, throughout the jungle area, people carried things on their heads. You have all probably seen images from Africa depicting this. Because their arms are tired and they have to go a long way - often under very, very difficult circumstances - they carry heavy loads on their heads. Often, there is a train of people carrying these loads. The translator observed one man who was walking with them and carrying nothing. So he asked, "Is that the boss? Is that the overseer? Is that the owner of all this enterprise? He doesn't carry anything."

The local said, "No, you don't understand. He is there to carry the load when one of them gets tired. When someone feels the burden, he picks it up and carries it. Often, he is the one who carries the most."

What is the word used to describe that person? "The one who walks beside."

The translator had the light go on. That is the word for the Holy Spirit! In fact, there is a somewhat more subtle translation: "The one who kneels beside us." That is what the Holy

Spirit does. When we do not have power ourselves, when we are introspective and only concerned for ourselves, when we feel that we can't do anything about the problems of the world around us, when we are dealing with our own burdens, challenges and struggles, when we have our moments of doubt, it is then that the Holy Spirit comes; it is then that the Holy Spirit that understands and empowers. The Holy Spirit is the One who comes alongside us and others as a support. It is not a Spirit of nationalism, or individualism or any other ism. This Spirit is not "us" but is beyond us because it is for all of us. Constantly working on and in us and others.

For this Spirit works! It works and doesn't stop working. Sometimes in spite of humanity's best efforts to impede it, this Spirit remains and is a persistent force at work in the universe. The Spirit is persistent in its work along the lines of a description provided by A. J. Gordon was a man who helped create Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts. He tells a story about walking along a very long roadway going up to a farm one day. In the distance, he saw a man pumping water out of a well. As he continued the walk, he noticed that the man had the most tremendous rhythm - he never broke one stroke. It was consistent, powerful and fast. He thought, "Wow! That must be some guy pumping that water!"

He walked for another few minutes, and the man was still pumping away. Gordon couldn't get over this man. "He's absolutely awesome! What a labourer this man is. He is incredible!" But as he got closer, he realized something: It wasn't a man at all. It was actually a wooden figure that looked like a man, with its arms pumping and a wire connected to the well. He went toward it, wondering what on earth was going on. What made this mechanical man

pump the well? Finally, he went right up to the well and he realized something: It was an artesian well. The force of the water was pumping the man, not the other way around!

That, my friends, what the Holy Spirit is like. It's the life force, the power that keeps working to keep us moving, living and thriving. Other spirits in this world may come and go, but the work of the Holy Spirit is eternal. It is not we who do all the pumping; it is not we who have all the righteousness...or sometimes even the right theology. But we do have a Spirit working in us and others that is the motivator and the power. It is that force, that strength, that helper, that gift, *the Spirit*, that keeps us moving in the right direction.