

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 10th Sunday After Pentecost, August 13, 2017

The Flesh and the Spirit
August 13, 2017

Romans 8:1-11 Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

As Christians, during worship we often repeat the Apostles Creed in one of its familiar versions. The traditional version includes the phrase, referring to Jesus, which says that he “was conceived by the Holy Ghost.” Some churches instead say “conceived by the Holy Spirit” as does the ecumenical version of the Creed.

Ghost? Spirit? What is this? What does it mean? And how could Christ have been conceived in the flesh by something that sounds like an apparition? It is a hard concept to understand and it is fundamental to being a Christian.

First, to clarify, the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost, if you prefer, is God and is Christ. It is the third part of the Trinity which we can't see but which is all around us, guiding us and protecting us. Before Jesus ascended to the Father he told the apostles that he would send an advocate to be with them once he ascended. This advocate is the Holy Spirit. The word “advocate” means someone who intercedes on behalf of another, and this is what the Holy Spirit does for us. The word “advocate” in scripture also translates as “helper”, “comforter” and “counselor” which also define the role of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is always with us to help us, **if** we accept Christ as our Lord and Savior.

That said, I personally prefer referring to the third part of the Godhead as the Holy Spirit, not the Holy Ghost although the choice really is not consequential.

Our scripture reading from Romans talks of the Spirit and the flesh and the fact that Jesus was incarnate in human flesh. In the reading, Paul talks of two priorities in life, those who “*live according to the flesh*” and those who “*live in accordance with the spirit*.” The former refers to the rule of sin and the latter refers to the rule of God. Walter Bruggemann, et al, ⁽¹⁾ called this a “*cosmic duality having to do with the rule of sin and the rule of God. In the end, those who would deny sin (the ‘flesh’) and live for God (the ‘spirit’) are able to do so only because the Spirit is the free gift of God.*”

Looking at our scripture reading from Matthew, the parable of the sower, we see the same duality. The parable of the sower is a statement of God's grace. Can you see that?

The flesh can reject God or be receptive to God, just as the soil can be thorny and not suitable for seed to grow, or it can be fertile and receptive.

If your heart is not receptive to God's grace and to Christ, you cannot be receptive to the message. Sin will block you from the power of the Spirit.

If on the other hand, just as seed will grow in a receptive environment, you will thrive when the flesh is receptive to the Holy Spirit.

As Paul puts it in his letter to the church at Rome, *"The mind governed by the flesh [that is by sin] is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God."*

Being governed by the flesh refers to living in a way that is controlled by rebellion against God, a mind-set that separates you from God and his freely offered grace.

Paul is saying that we must live according to the Spirit, that is to have our minds set on the Spirit, to keep our minds receptive instead of blocking out the message of Christ.

We are the seed. If we prefer to live on the rocky soil amidst the thorns, we cannot readily grow in Christ. If we keep our minds focused on Christ and God, we live in fertile soil that the Holy Spirit can enter.

"When chastising his disciples for falling asleep while he prayed, Jesus said, 'The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak.' Paul admitted how much he regretted the weakness that prevented him from doing all that he wanted to do." (These Days, April 28, 2015).

I similarly regret that I can't do all that I want to do but I know that the Holy Spirit is there to guide me and to assist me, just as he is there for all of us if we just reach out to him.

Our Daily Bread (May 28, 2013) commented that, *"... we may be involved in an activity that has become all encompassing --- and we know it would be best to limit it. Or we may have a habit or practice that we know misses the mark of pleasing God, and we realize that we need to let it go because we love Him and want Him to be glorified through us."*

"When we find things that interfere with our relationship with the Lord, with His help we can stop. God has given us the provision and the Spirit provides the power."

In one of his sermons, Walter Bruggemann said, *"... life with the God of promise,*

summons, and command leads to abundance and well-being, whereas a life lived apart from or against God's purposes is a life of destructiveness without healing force or possibility."⁽²⁾

Our choices are briars or abundance, the flesh or the Spirit.

"When a person sows the seed of the word, the person does not know what he or she is doing or what effect the seed is having ... When the person sows the seed, he or she must not look for quick results. There is never any haste in nature's growth. It takes a long, long time before the acorn becomes an oak; and it may take a long, long time before the seed germinates in the heart of someone. But often a word dropped into a person's heart when young lies dormant until some day it awakens and avoids some great temptation or even preserves the person's soul from death. We live in an age which looks for quick results, but in the sowing of the seed we must sow patience and in hope, and sometimes must leave the harvest to the years."⁽³⁾

Let us pray, *"You are prefect, Lord, and we are so far from Perfect. Please chip away at our imperfections through the work of the Holy Spirit. Help us each day to grow more and more like you."* (Our Daily Bread, May 28, 2013).

Amen.

1. Walter Bruggemann, et al, "Texts for Preaching - Year A," Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1995
2. Walter Bruggemann, The Collected Sermons of Walter Bruggemann, vol.2, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2015
3. William Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew, vol.2, rev. ed., Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975 (quotation has been modified to make it gender neutral)

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