

Pentecost - John 20:19-23

A third-grade Sunday school teacher was giving a lesson on the commandment, "Honor thy father and mother." To get the class involved a little more, she asked "Does anyone know a commandment for brothers and sisters?" One sharp girl raised her hand and said, "Yes! Thou shalt not kill!"

God acts in visible and invisible ways. The scriptures describe God visiting our ancestors in visible form. God walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the garden, visited Abraham in the heat of the afternoon by the oaks of Mamre, spoke to Moses face to face on Mount Sinai.

Of course, we as Christians believe that God became one of us in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is for us God made visible. But God's actions are not limited only to these visible manifestations.

In fact, God acts more frequently and more universally in ways that we cannot see. This brings us to today's feast, the Feast of Pentecost.

Because today we celebrate the gift of the Spirit, and it is through the Spirit of God that God works invisibly in our lives and in our world.

When we say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit," we say that God is present and active in all things, in all things but sin. When we say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit", we say that there is no natural process, no historical development that is independent of God. God is present invisibly in all things, guiding the events of nature and history.

The famous Jewish comedian, Heni Youngman, was famous for his one-liners. On his ninetieth birthday a friend asked him, “Heni, to what do you give credit for your long life?” Without skipping a beat, Youngman responded, “Breathing.”

There you have it. There’s no argument about that. Where there is no breath, there is no life. It is our invisible breath which sustains our lives from minute to minute, day to day, year to year.

In today’s gospel Jesus breathes on the disciples and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” It is the Spirit of God who is the breath of the world, working invisibly to carry creation towards the Kingdom. In the Holy Spirit we believe that there is no time or circumstance, in which God is not somehow invisibly active.

Let me just give you one example. You are the person you are largely because of the genetic makeup you received from your parents. It was the genes from your mother or father which made you male or female, short or tall, healthy or prone to disease.

But your parents in turn received their genetic makeup from their parents who each had two parents. So, as you move from generation to generation, the genetic material doubles.

If we were to take a period of time, say 500 years (which amounts to about 21 generations) and do the math, everyone sitting here has over 2 million people in your gene pool. That is a huge amount of people. And you can be assured that in that pool there were some geniuses and some goofballs; there were some poets and some dunderheads; there were some lovers and some loners; some saints and some sinners. All of them made a contribution. All of them contributed to the people we are today.

What I just described was a natural process. All I did was do the math for the last 500 years. But because we believe in the Holy Spirit, we believe that that process was invisibly guided by God. God was working through the lives of all our ancestors to make us the unique daughter or son we are today.

In the Holy Spirit we believe that in every age and in every circumstance God is present, moving us toward the Kingdom.

Such belief should give us constant cause for hope and for courage. If the Spirit of God is always active in every time and place, then there is a force in our world that is opposed to the evil that surrounds us.

Even though there might be problems in our family, sickness in our body, or violence and hatred in our world, if the Spirit of God is invisibly moving among us, there is always the possibility that evil will be vanquished and that good will be victorious.

If the invisible power of God is moving among us, there is always reason for hope. There is also reason for courage. If God's spirit is real and active, we can dare to do the right thing, even when we face opposition.

We will dare to make peace even though there is no guarantee that the forces of hatred or violence will respond. We will dare to work for justice even though the powers of selfishness and greed seem overwhelming.

We will support the poor and the vulnerable even though those who are unconcerned are indifferent. When we believe that the Spirit of God is active and moving among us, we will find the courage to work for what is right even though it seems impossible, because we know that we are not alone.

The Spirit of God is the breath of the world, constantly holding onto creation and moving it towards the Kingdom.

Believing in that Spirit gives us constant reason for hope and for courage. We hope that there will be a better future, that God's plan for creation will be done. We find the courage to cooperate with the Spirit to make God's plan a reality.

“He breathed on them and said, receive the Holy Spirit”. Amen.