

Introduction to the Spirit Saturday, February 23, 2002 Life in the Spirit Seminar

There is a term, symbol, used in our Church that is so common that it has a danger of disappearing. **We begin our prayers: “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” but when do we ever reflect on what that means?** Going back into the history of our Church, the great controversies in the early centuries were all about this: **the nature of God. What is God like?** If you go back before Christianity, **people identified God with nature.** To this day there are people who say, well, I really feel closer to God when I go to the mountains, or I feel closer to God when I go to the woods, or I feel closer to God when I go to the ocean. Why is that? Because **there is something in nature that we are sympathetic to.** If we are in the right environment, **we feel somehow closer to our own being, and many people identify that with God.**

However, with the coming of the biblical religions, Judaism, Christianity, we have a very different idea of what God is or who God is. And that’s the first thing. God isn’t really a “what,” nor is God something I really feel; at least it’s not something I feel through my senses. But **God is really a reality that is really the ground of all being.** God is not part of nature. God is totally different from nature, and yet everything depends upon God so much so that **St. Augustine said that God is closer to us than we are to ourselves.** But this is not a closeness we often are in contact with. Partly this is something we have to grow into; partly it’s something that has been obstructed by the existence of sin. So **sin holds us back from a deeper communion with God.** But communion with God in the biblical sense is not the same thing as going to the ocean and just feeling at peace. It’s something deeper than that; it’s different from that. That doesn’t make going to the ocean bad, but it’s very different.

It’s a personal relationship. When Moses felt the call and saw this extraordinary bush that was on fire but not being consumed, which he couldn’t understand what it was, he had an encounter with a personal **God who said, “I AM WHO AM.”** That was his name. Now we will never know completely what this is about unless it’s in heaven, but God is revealing himself as some one. And according to the Scripture, our human reality is all tied to that because **we are made in the image and the likeness of God.** Nothing else in nature is made in the image and likeness of God, only humanity. And the fact that we have a feeling of “I,” that we have a self-awareness, is itself a mirror reflection, you might say, of the divine nature: “I AM WHO AM.”

This sounds a little abstract, and it is, but we have to use abstract words to get into a mystery. **God is ultimately a personal mystery who communicates with us and who elicits from us a response.** This is very different from the idea that other cultures have had of God, which are many and varied. But the biblical idea is God is the one who is the ground of being, the one who’s image and nature we share. The contact point is our own feeling of “I,” our ability to be aware of ourselves. And God is addressing us and asking for a response. Therefore human beings are created as the responsible creature, that is, potentially responsible; we are capable of responding; we can respond. We may not respond. We often do not respond, but we are capable of responding, otherwise we wouldn’t be human in the true, fullest sense of the word.

Further, **in Christ, God reveals himself more deeply, and, in Christ, we see the nature of God revealed as triune, meaning Father, Son, and Spirit.** And when we baptize a person, whether a child or an adult, we always ask either the individual or the individual's godparents: "Do you believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth? Do you believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?" Well, I have found people immediately say yes when asked, "Do you believe in God the Father? Why? Well, because we all have fathers even if we didn't know them. We wouldn't be on earth without a father. Now some of us didn't have good fathers. Some of our fathers were perhaps distant; other fathers perhaps were abusive; some fathers were not there, but even in that case we kind of know what we missed. So **we all have an idea of what a good father is.**

And furthermore, Jesus never used the word "Father"; actually he used the word "Daddy, *Abba*." We know what a good daddy is. **A good daddy is the kind of person that we can climb up onto his lap and we can just be there and trust totally in his care.** I will add that in Jewish culture, because after all Jesus was Jewish in his humanity, in Jewish culture the *abba* took care of children outside of the home. And you can still witness this today in Israel or even in New York where you have your very conservative families. The mother is there, but she is very quiet; she does not take care of the children in public. The *abba* takes care of the children. And you hear kids screaming all the time: "Abba, Abba, Abba," whenever they need something—never Mama, Mama, Mama, no. That's Jewish. And so Jesus brings that Jewish mentality to us because he was human; in his human culture he was Jewish. Pope John Paul pointed out that we could many times say Mama instead of Papa; it would be just the same, but we don't because it's not our tradition. What is equivalent is the care and the love that is being expressed. And it's something we can grasp rather well. Okay, God the Father.

Well the next one, **Son**—well, that also we can grasp to a great extent because Jesus is like us in all things but sin. So through our own experience and our self-reflection **we can understand something about what this is.** It's still a profound mystery. **How or why would God want to enter into our experience,** especially when we have already so marred our experience? It's still a mystery, but that's what this Son is all about. **The Son is about how God enters into human life.** We call this the mystery of the Incarnation, the embodiment of God. Christianity is an incarnational religion, and one of the great works of the Church is to hold that, to make sure we don't lose that because there is a great tendency in human nature to want to deny it. It's almost like the statement, "If something is too good to be true, it isn't." Well, the Incarnation is almost too good to be true, so it isn't. That's what the human tendency is, to push away the Incarnation, to split apart the **humanity and divinity**, to emphasize too much one or the other, to think of Jesus just like us and then forget his divinity, or to think of Jesus as divine and forget that he is human too. **It's the combination which is important.**

Thirdly, the **Spirit**—this is very important, and this is really what this day is about, *Life in the Spirit*. The Spirit is, you might say, the unknown element. And it's very important that we understand that when we say there are three persons in one God—actually it's wrong—"one God subsists in three divine persons" is the correct way to put that. Secondly, person—when we use this language we don't mean people. They are

not three individual people who are divine. They don't talk to each other. Another way to put this is **only one divine will**. There is only one divine will. There are not three divine wills. There is one divine will and Jesus has a human will. So **there are two wills in Christ, the divine and the human. There is only one will in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.**

But **Spirit**—how do we ever pick up the meaning of Spirit? This is really difficult because we can't identify with something as tangible as a parent. We can't identify with our own experience. By Spirit is meant something altogether else. Jesus used the word "Spirit," which actually in Greek and in Hebrew, both, is a word for "wind" or "air." And the idea is, well, how do you talk about the air? **How do you talk about something that is so intangible and invisible and Jesus added unpredictable?** He says, you know, the wind comes and goes. You don't know when it's going to come up; you don't know when it's going to stop. And there is something about God also, the very mystery of God, the unpredictability of God. **We will never figure God out.** We will never be able to explain, well, now in this case this is what is going to happen. See, God is Spirit. God will always defy our categories. God will be beyond our ideas and surely God transcends our feelings.

But it is this God who has come to share life with us; it's not we who have gone to God. It is this God who envelops us. And **the Spirit permeates absolutely everything**. And we don't have a sense of this. We, in our own judgment, divide life into good and bad: this is a good experience, that's a bad experience, this is joyful, and this is hateful. But as Jesus teaches, the Spirit of God permeates everything. And even the cross—and you think of Jesus suffering on the cross—the Spirit was there too. **This is the Spirit that we need to be more aware of.** And this is the purpose of today, to bring us into a deeper **awareness of how the Spirit can lead us and guide us and direct us—not help us with our agenda!** That's the problem with so many of us. We pray to God to help us in our agenda. We think we know already what we need to do. The Spirit is about God's agenda. **What is the Spirit calling us to do?**

The last thing I would like to mention is praising God. **In the Spirit we have a capacity to praise God in ways that sometimes seem foolish to other people because it goes beyond what we normally call our reason.** For example, I am speaking; I hope I make sense. But when we praise God we don't have to make sense. There is a special gift of the Spirit called the **gift of "Tongues,"** where to others sounds like babble, but it is meaningful in the sense that it has a meaning that transcends rational meaning. **It is the use of our faculties for nothing other than praising God.** St. Augustine said that when the oxen low they are praising God because that's what they are supposed to do. You could think of a child gurgling as a praise of God. Well, and there is a certain amount of truth in that. If you really believe in the Spirit, you see how the Spirit permeates everything, things we call "good" and things we call "bad." The Spirit is everywhere, calling everything into unity. The gift of Tongues is a gift to leave behind our own judgments and just allow really God to raise us up. We don't praise God to help God. God doesn't need our praise. When we praise God, when we let go of our own judgments, when we let go of our own prejudices and preconceptions, and we just let God take us up into his Spirit, the result may look like nonsense to outsiders, but from the

inside it is we who are being blessed; we are being lifted up. **And what is prayer, but lifting up the heart and mind to God?** Often it's our very ideas that keep the heart and mind away from God. In the Spirit we rise up to God. So I would like you to consider how perhaps through the day the Lord will touch you in a way that you really think is strange and weird, and that may be very much a sign of the Spirit.