

SERMON TITLE: "I Believe in the Holy Spirit" (Series on *The Apostles' Creed*)
SERMON TEXT: John 14:15-27
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: February 10, 2019, at First UMC (Boy Scout Sunday)

INTRODUCTION

Because today is Boy Scout Sunday, I decided to do a little reading this week about Boy Scout Spirit. Wikipedia says that "Scout Spirit is an ideal attitude that Scouts around the world are supposed to show, based on adherence to the Scout Oath and Law." Wikipedia went on to say that, before a Boy Scout advances to a new rank, he has to demonstrate this Scout Spirit.¹

Defining the subject a little more, the website ScoutMerit.org indicates that a Scout shows "Scout spirit by being a role model to his peers" within the Boy Scout organization and in everyday life. "The concept of Scout spirit is not based on how many Scouting events or outings a Scout attends, but rather by how he helps bring out the best in others as a reflection of his own character and attitude in his 'daily' life."²

I was interested in Scout Spirit because the theme of today's worship service—besides Boy Scout Sunday—is the Holy Spirit. Ever since the beginning of the year, I've been preaching a sermon series based on *The Apostles' Creed*. On the first Sunday, we talked about our belief in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. The next four Sundays, we affirmed our belief in God's fully-divine/fully-human Son Jesus, his suffering and death, resurrection, and ascension. Now, today, we come to the Holy Spirit.

Of the three persons of the divine Trinity, the Holy Spirit is probably the least understood and the most confusing. For example, within Christianity, there has been a nearly two-thousand year debate and division over whether the Holy Spirit proceeds just from God the Father or also from Jesus the Son. Since that deeply philosophical and theological debate can boggle our minds, today I invite you to look with me, instead, at something a lot simpler. By examining what Jesus taught his disciples in John,

chapter 14, let's see if we can get a better handle on what it means for us to say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit."

1--ADVOCATE

Throughout most of the Bible, the Hebrew and Greek words that convey the idea of the Holy Spirit are words about wind and breath. In the Genesis creation story, God's Spirit-wind swept over the face of the deep, and God's Spirit breathed life into the first human beings. In the New Testament book of Acts, chapter two, when the Holy Spirit came with power on the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit was accompanied by the sound of strong wind. Even John 20 tells that the resurrected Jesus appeared to his disciples, "breathed on them," and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." It's hard to make a tighter connection between breath and Spirit than that.

But in this 14th chapter of John, when Jesus talks about the Holy Spirit, he uses the different Greek word *Paraclete*, which has a variety of meanings. The *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible, which we just read, translates *Paraclete* as *Advocate*. This definition tells us that the Holy Spirit is the one who intercedes on our behalf. Like a defense attorney, the Holy Spirit goes between us and our divine judge. The Holy Spirit makes a case for our forgiveness and pleads for God's mercy. In the New Testament letter of 1 John, chapter two, we read, "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." What Jesus does, so does the Holy Spirit. When it comes to our sin and punishment, the Holy Spirit teams up with Jesus to give us a powerful defense.

But the Holy Spirit isn't only an advocate *for us*. The Holy Spirit is also an advocate *for Christ*. In John 14:26, Jesus told his disciples that the *Paraclete* would come in his name and remind them of everything that Jesus had taught them. Even today, the Holy Spirit advocates to us on behalf of Jesus, so that we will be educated, inspired, persuaded, and empowered to obey Jesus' commandments. We

may be sinners, but our plea bargain agreement requires and provides a program of rehabilitation and transformation. As a Holy Advocate for both sides, the Holy Spirit will help us live according to the teachings of Christ.

2--COMFORTER

But *Advocate* is only one way the Greek word *Paraclete* can be translated. The 1609 *King James Version* of the Bible translates Jesus' word *Paraclete* as a divine *Comforter*. This description of the Holy Spirit emphasizes the kind of love and friendship that supports us through difficult times in our lives. This comfort is especially helpful when we're suffering from sickness and grief, or when we're troubled and afraid.

The comforting character of the *Paraclete*, or Holy Spirit, is clear in John 14. Throughout this chapter, Jesus was telling the disciples that he would be leaving them soon. His death on the cross and his resurrection and ascension to God would take him away from them. But Jesus comforted his followers with the assurance that they wouldn't be left as orphans. Eventually they would join him in the place where he was going. But, in the meantime, God would send them another *Paraclete*—a companion, a teacher, a helper. All this comforting was meant to give the disciples peace in their hearts and minds.

We need a comforter in our lives. No matter how independent and strong we'd like to think we are, we all need someone who will encourage us and pat us on the back. We need friendly smiles, warm hugs, and the assurance that things will turn out all right. We need people who will give us grace and space for those times when we're stumbling along in a fog of confusion or stumbling over our own stubbornness. Fortunately, most of us have a number of people who help us in those ways. Family, friends, business associates, and church members offer us comfort to keep us going.

But, even if we have an ample supply of comforting people around us, it's good to know that the Holy Spirit is also there to comfort us. For those times when we don't want to talk about our problems

with our family or neighbors, or it doesn't seem like our friends would understand, it's good to know that we can be comforted by the Spirit of God, who already knows everything about us, understands us better than we know ourselves, and sticks with us through thick and thin.

An old hymn proclaims this good news:

Oh, spread the tidings 'round, wherever man is found,
Wherever human hearts and human woes abound:
Let every Christian tongue proclaim the joyful sound:
The Comforter has come!
The Comforter has come! The Comforter has come!
The Holy Ghost from heav'n, the Father's promise giv'n!
Oh, spread the tidings 'round, wherever man is found:
The Comforter has come!³

3—COUNSELOR

In the *New International Version* of the Bible, a third definition for *Paraclete* tells us that the Holy Spirit is also a *Counselor*. This translation helps us understand that the Holy Spirit wants to help us become more mature and healthy as human beings and as Christians. A counselor may be an advocate sometimes and usually comforts us a lot, but the primary job of a counselor is to guide us toward options for change and opportunities for growth. Along with comforting the challenged comes the need to challenge the comfortable. As a Counselor, the Holy Spirit pushes and pulls us to stretch our understandings and expand our hearts.

Just like in counseling sessions with a psychological therapist, this kind of Holy Spirit counseling doesn't always come easily. It's human nature to resist change. We don't like to admit our faults or work on our weaknesses. Because we're so afraid of the growing pains we might experience, most of us won't even seek the help of a counselor until our marriage is in shambles, our children are using drugs, or we're unable to cope with our responsibilities. Even then, our hope is that the counselor will pat us on the hand and say, "There, there. Everything will be fine."

But the truth is that things often don't get better until we begin doing some very intense self-examination, until we begin breaking some persistently bad habits, and until we begin practicing some new ways of living. We didn't get ourselves into this mess quickly, and we aren't going to get out of it quickly either. The honesty and vulnerability required in counseling is difficult to bear. That's why some people turn away from such psychological therapy. And, sadly, that's why some people turn away from the therapy of the Holy Spirit.

Accepting the wisdom and direction of the Holy Spirit isn't easy, but it's worthwhile. As we follow the guidance of our Holy Counselor, we'll find ourselves becoming more hopeful Christians and more healthy human beings.

CONCLUSION

If you want to remember the Greek word *Paraclete*, you can think of a parakeet bird. Or you could think of a pair of cleats, like the shoes a baseball player might wear. But more important than remembering the Greek word is remembering that the Holy Spirit who is united three-in-one and one-in-three with God the Father and Jesus the Son is present and available to us. Like Jesus said to his disciples, they weren't going to be alone. Even though his death, resurrection, and ascension to God would take Jesus away from them, they wouldn't be without support and guidance. No matter what's going on, said Jesus, don't be troubled or afraid. The one who would come after Jesus would be no scary holy ghost. As Jesus told his disciples, the *Paraclete* would be their Holy Advocate, their Holy Comforter, and their Holy Counselor. And, according to John 14, that's what it means to say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit."

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scout_Spirit

²https://meritbadge.org/wiki/index.php/Scout_Spirit

³Lyrics by Frank Bottome, "The Comforter Has Come," 1890.