

**“Holy Spirit”**

Acton Congregational Church (ACC)

25 September 2023

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Texts: John 14:15-26

Romans 8:1-6, 12-17

*“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”*

~ John 14:26

**Prayer**

**Living Spirit of God, come;**

**Fall afresh on us –**

**Speak to us, comfort us, disturb us, transform us,**

**And inspire us to live lives filled with God’s presence. Amen.**

When you walk into this sanctuary, which has undergone several small and large remodeling projects over the years, the last thing that may cross your mind is to ask what kind of image of God turned this building and this congregation into a visible embodiment of the Christian faith at the heart of Acton.

Knowing our history is important. There is much more to this sanctuary than the gorgeous stained-glass windows, our lovely organ with the tastefully decorated pipes, this pulpit, the baptismal font, the communion table or the focal point behind the pulpit, which I have been told several times is not the cross. This building along with our music program – and I want to say that I am thrilled to welcome Ellie Armsby as our new choir director - also our youth group, the Cornerstone Thrift Store, the Sunday morning worship services and everything that happens in this congregation are grounded in a very particular understanding of history. Over the last 2000 years, Christians of every confessional and theological stripe have declared that Jesus Christ is Lord, that he stood up to the powers of evil in human history with defiant love, outlived their attempt to silence him, and sent his first followers into the world as agents of hope, spreaders of compassion, preachers of truth, givers of joy, bearers of kindness, lovers of justice, makers of peace, singers of forgiveness, builders of communities without hate or walls, and dreamers of a new humanity transformed by the self-giving love of the Creator. The mission of the Church, our only reason to gather and have a building and a presence in the world, is to carry on with the work of Jesus Christ. We are here to give a face and a body to God’s love and grace, which is no small task if you ask me. God is not trapped behind these stained-glass windows. God is not confined to this building. God is certainly here with us, but God is also out there and our job as followers of Christ and people of faith is to persistently invite humankind to see the goodness of the Creator in nature, in each other, and to oppose

everything that threatens life, kills people, destroys creation and blinds the human race to the good life, a life of meaning God intends for us.

When we forget our history, we tend to drift away from the stories that nurture our faith. We slide away from our core values and mission. We stop paying attention to the kerygmatic proclamation that has enlivened two millennia of church history. We cease to remember the long road of faithful, courageous, self-giving and cross-bearing discipleship that paved the way for us to be God's children here and now, today. We mistake the superfluous for the essential. We become repetitive, anxious, fearful, exhausted and reactive trying to do and accomplish what can only be done and accomplished by a faith community that has its collective mind set on the things of the Spirit that breathes life and peace into the Church.

The very first Lord's Supper was not a serene, meditative, personal and well-choreographed liturgy; it was a meal thick with fear, pathos, doubts, questions and uncertainty. The disciples were afraid of what might happen to Jesus in Jerusalem. They knew there was a warrant for his arrest issued by the chief priests and the Pharisees.<sup>1</sup> They knew that, if caught, Jesus would be killed. Everything they had given up their lives for; everything they had invested their time and energy in for three years; everything they believed with their whole hearts was unraveling right before their eyes. At the table, Jesus told them that he would be betrayed. He talked about going away to a place where the disciples would not be able to follow. The atmosphere in the Upper Room was very tense and heavy. And it was in that room where the shadow of the disciples' apprehension and heartbrokenness mingled with the light of Jesus' loving care for his friends that Jesus made an astonishing promise, ***"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.... the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."***

The Holy Spirit. I confess that I have never preached a sermon on the Spirit of God. Since the fourth century, the Church has defined the Spirit as the Third Person of the Trinity, but no preacher really knows how to pin down this Spirit that has been sent to keep the teachings of Jesus alive in our hearts and to reveal the Living Christ to the Universal Church again and again throughout the ages. In Genesis, it is the "*ruach*" of God that was, in the beginning, brooding over the face of the waters of creation. This Hebrew word "*ruach*" can be translated as "wind," "breath," or "spirit." The composers of the story of creation wanted God's people to remember that the Spirit of God is the creative energy that brought life on earth into existence. Jesus himself had a hard time speaking about the Spirit. When he met Nicodemus at night, Jesus said to him, ***"The Spirit blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes."***<sup>2</sup> Like in Hebrew, the Greek word for "spirit" is the same for "wind" and "breath," which allows us to begin to imagine the Holy Spirit as the divine breath that moves freely among us and animates every living being, every person and the whole universe.

Mainline Protestant Christians like you and me are often uneasy with the “Holy Spirit talk.” We can conceptualize God as the Maker of heaven and earth, the Father or Mother in heaven who gives us our daily bread; and most of us understand that Jesus, even though he was fully human like the rest of us, was the Son of God who embodied the fullness of God’s love in human history. The Spirit on the other hand is tricky because our religious experience and theological language give us a spirituality from the neck up. We want our faith to make sense intellectually. We prefer talking about God through thoughtfully crafted and carefully selected words if we talk about God at all outside the sanctuary. We want our services to be orderly; the sermons to be thought-provoking but short; the music inspiring; the prayers well prepared; the bulletin without typos; and we want this whole sacred time of worship to be done in one hour. The idea of the Holy Spirit as the Divine Wind that energizes our whole body with God’s presence in the worship service and fills us with the breath of God so we may breathe God’s love out into the flow of human history, the idea of this Spirit as the power that makes us reckless when it comes to taking risks for the sake of justice, solidarity, forgiveness and reconciliation makes us uneasy and rightly so. We all tend to cling to what we already know and feels safe. Most of us would rather practice a predictable religious life than to open our whole selves to the Spirit that might blow us beyond our tired spirituality of the mind, of the intellect, of the dogmas and creeds of the Church. But the renewal of the Church will not come from people who are reluctant or afraid of living the life of the Spirit. It is this Holy Spirit that we cannot easily define that empowers people like you and me to allow our lives to be shaped by Jesus Christ so we can keep on following him. As Walter Brueggemann once pointed out, **“The church never goes anywhere important under its own steam.”**<sup>3</sup> We need the holy breath of God to fill us with new wind. We all need the Spirit to fire up faith in our inner life so our presence in the outer world may show something of the God of creation and life we worship. I saw a bumper sticker a while ago that read, **“The world you desire comes not by chance but by change.”** The changes that will bring new life into our church will not come by chance either; they will only come when you and I begin to change how we live. The life-giving changes we want to see happening in our church at a time when so many congregations in Acton are struggling will come, as Paul said to the Romans, when we begin to walk and live together according to the Spirit.

But what is it? What is this Spirit-led life? You may be asking yourself right now. Well, as Greg Garrett put it so well in his book *“The Other Jesus,”* **“When in doubt look at Jesus.”**<sup>4</sup> In our tradition, Jesus – the young man from Nazareth, the Child of God, who blessed little children, fed the hungry, healed the sick, touched the untouchable, embraced the marginalized, ate with all kinds of riffraff, broke religious rules to include the excluded, who risked the ire of the Empire with all its political and military apparatus to announce God’s Kingdom of peace among the poor, Jesus who prayed for those who crucified him, taught his followers to love even our enemies and offered himself, his life, his words, and his own breath to bring humankind back to God and to show us that a life without purpose, without love, without kindness, without friendship, without hope, without God is an un-lived life – this Jesus is the one who models for the Church what living a life according to the Spirit looks like. In fact, the Gospels claim that Jesus received the full measure of the Holy

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Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

Spirit at his baptism, and it was at that moment that his presence as the Messiah, the Son of God was revealed to the world. After his resurrection, the Risen Christ appeared to his disciples who were cowering in terror behind closed doors and said, **“Receive the Holy Spirit.”**<sup>5</sup> And ever since, the Holy Spirit, this presence of God that is impossible to explain, has been empowering, guiding, leading, challenging, stirring, and rousing God’s children to remember Jesus, to take his teachings to heart and act them out in the world and to dare set our minds on the Spirit.

In the 1820’s, the First Parish of Acton was engulfed in a major theological controversy that raged across Massachusetts. Liberal-leaning Unitarians and Traditional Trinitarians were out of step with each other over the image of God. Unitarians, as you know, valued a rational approach to the Christian faith and rejected the Doctrine of the Trinity. While they saw Jesus as an unparalleled moral teacher, they opposed the Trinitarian claim that Christ is the Second Person of the Trinity and of the same substance as God. The dispute between the two sides became so unmanageable that Rev. Marshall Shedd resigned in 1831. The Trinitarians who remained committed to the uniquely Christian view of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit submitted a motion at the Parish meeting on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 1832 requesting permission to form a new church in town. They understood that Christians do not believe in the Doctrine of Trinity, we believe in the Living God whose image is made visible in the Spirit-led life of Jesus Christ. And as the British theologian N.T. Wright said it so well, **“It is because of Jesus that Christians claim they know who the creator God of the world really is. It is because he, a human being, is now with the Father in the dimension we call “heaven” that Christians came so quickly to speak of God as both Father and Son. It is because he remains as yet in heaven while we are on earth (though the Spirit makes him present to us) that Christians came to speak of the Spirit, too, as a distinct member of the divine Trinity. It is all because of Jesus that we speak of God the way we do. And it is all because of Jesus that we find ourselves called to live the way we do.”**<sup>6</sup> On January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1832 at a regular meeting of the First Parish in Acton, fifty-nine Trinitarians were dismissed from the First Parish, which eventually merged with the First Parish of Stow. On March 13<sup>th</sup> of that same year, the Trinitarians formed a new church: the Evangelical Congregational Church of Acton. In 1963, our congregation joined the United Church of Christ and became known as the Acton Congregational Church.<sup>7</sup>

When we gather in this sanctuary, we are standing on the shoulders of those who came before us and experienced God as the loving Parent who revealed the depth of love in Jesus. There is an image of God that nurtures our faith here at Acton Congregational Church. We know that we are never alone because we are children of God. We know the Holy Spirit continues to energize and animate our faith. The Spirit continues to breathe new life into our mission. The Spirit continues to call us to be, not a fearful, anxious church that is sitting behind these walls, but a church that wants to bring Good News of new life and peace to humankind. The Holy Spirit continues to instigate us to live faithfully, joyfully and abundantly.

On this World Communion Sunday, the Sunday we make a point to remember that there are Christians around the globe coming to the Lord's Table because the Church Universal refuses to forget our history, I hope you can feel the Spirit in your life. Remember friends, God sent the Spirit so that you and I might become a Spirit-led faith community that is keeping the story of Jesus, his love, his teachings, his Spirit-filled life alive in human history. We are the ones who have been called by the Spirit to give evidence of God's creative power and life-giving love in our time. And it is only because we have set our minds on the things of the Spirit that we are willing to devote our time, our energy, our strength, our resources and our lives to making the Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit visible in Acton and in the world. But if you ever feel a bit overwhelmed, anxious, doubtful, fearful and even hopeless during this time of many changes for the Church in America, remember our history. Remember that it is our deepest and most precious conviction that we are not alone or orphaned. The Spirit of God is with us, enabling us to live as children of God.

Thanks be to God: Creator, Son and Holy Spirit, now and ever. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> John 11:57.

<sup>2</sup> John 3:8.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann in The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann, "The Ultimate Gate-Crasher," p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Greg Garrett in The Other Jesus, p. 90 [Kindle Edition].

<sup>5</sup> John 21:22a.

<sup>6</sup> N.T. Wright in Simply Christian, p. 140 [Kindle Edition].

<sup>7</sup> Based on the book prepared for the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Acton Congregational Church – A Brief History of the Acton Congregational Church, p. 9-11.