



**“OUR CONSTITUTIVE FAITH:  
4. ONE SPIRIT”  
REV. BRADLEY L. DEHAVEN  
ST. ANDREW’S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
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John 14:15-31

Having traveled through much of the United States, and having been a student of speech, language, history and scripture for many years, I have determined that Professor Henry Higgins was right! You remember Henry Higgins, don’t you? That pompous, old professor of linguistics who would take a young flower girl named Eliza Doolittle and transform her into someone of nobility merely by changing her dialect? The play of course is My Fair Lady. The notion of Higgins was that by retraining the pronunciation of certain syllables, one might fool others into believing that one is a person of a different class, upbringing, social level... Of course it worked in that play all too well.

But I have become a sort of amateur linguistics detective. In my many travels throughout North America I have been able to discern the many different distinctions of dialect directly from different diction – or to put it another way, I have learned the subtle art of “Where abouts are you from?”

The most fascinating words are those that we have managed to create due to a shortfall of appropriate existing words. Take for example, “You.” This word, the second person pronoun in English conversation, has two distinct meanings: It can be singular, referring to you yourself as one person; or it can be plural, referring to all of you people as a group. What is fun about all this is that we’ve managed to invent words to distinguish between the two, and depending on where you live in the United States, that can be a hoot.

For instance, take Pennsylvania. If you lived in Western Pennsylvania, say around Pittsburgh, you would say “youses guys” for the plural form of You. If you’re from Eastern Pennsylvania, say around Philadelphia, you’d say “You’ins’ Guys.” Down here, we are all familiar with “y’all.” That is Southern for “you all”, except here in Texas, where it is singular. The Plural is “all y’all.” And Spanish is a whole ‘nother area yet!!

The most difficult thing for us though, comes not from the ways in which we have tried to compensate for the lack of adequate linguistic tools. Rather it comes from the fact that we have become relatively ignorant to any such reference of the differences between the singular and the plural forms of the word, “you” when it comes to translating scripture. And so the number one problem we face today is the assumption that the scriptures literally mean singular, when in fact they mean plural.

Today’s scripture reading is a case in point. The Gospel of John was attempting to capture the gift of assurance that Jesus was offering in his farewell discourse to his disciples. Whereas the other gospels have Jesus teaching all along, John has Jesus teaching all the important things to the disciples in his final meal with them – and this meal starts near the middle of the book, not at the end as in Matthew, Mark and Luke. John wants the reader to know that Jesus needs to share with his disciples several important things about being a disciple – and later being an Apostle. When he recognizes that they likely won’t get it all, Jesus needs to give them some reassurance that they won’t be left alone.

Andrew Rogness once commented on this style of teaching by comparing it to the scene in Hamlet where Polonius is giving his son Laertes some last minute advice before the younger was to embark on a long journey. He wrote:

“When I first saw the play on stage, I was completely surprised. These gems of wisdom were presented as an endless list forced upon a son impatiently wanting to get one with the trip. The see-saw between the son taking a step to the boat and the father pulling him back for one more pearl of wisdom added a whole new dynamic to the words on a page. All the audience could relate to this experience, and the result was gales of laughter.”<sup>1</sup>

The same is true of this scene in John with Jesus and his disciples. Unfortunately it is not the disciples who are leaving, but rather Jesus. And they are afraid. When Jesus offers them to not be afraid for his peace he will leave with them, Jesus is offering them comfort. And the greatest gift he offers is the gift that will sustain them when he is gone, and will remind them of all that he had taught them. Because of this, there are several things happening here that we need to be aware of today as the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **I. First, The Nature Of The Spirit Is To Sustain Us In Jesus’ Absence.**

The role of the Holy Spirit, according to Jesus is to be with us when Jesus is no longer able to. The promise is that the nature of the Holy Spirit is the same nature as that of Jesus and God. Because this Spirit sustains us, we can be assured that we will never be alone. The writers of the Nicene Creed attributed this nature to being the very nature of God. Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the early Church Fathers who battled against the heresies of Arianism would say this of the Holy Spirit:

“The deity of the Holy Spirit ought to be clearly recognized in Scripture. Look at these facts: Christ is born; the Spirit is His forerunner. Christ is baptized; the Spirit bears witness. Christ is tempted; the Spirit leads Him up. Christ ascends; the Spirit takes His place. What great things are there in the character of God which are not found in the Spirit? What titles which belong to God are not also applied to Him? He is called the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, the mind of Christ, the Spirit of the Lord, the Spirit of adoption, of truth, of liberty; the Spirit of wisdom, of understanding, of counsel, of might, of knowledge, of godliness, of the fear of God. This only begins to show how unlimited He is.”

If the Holy Spirit has been at work with God, for God, from God from the very beginning, then we ought to know that we can trust its presence with us even to this day. Jesus will not be with his disciples for very much longer, but they will not be left alone. The Holy Spirit has been given to us to sustain us in Jesus absence. But wait! There’s more!

### **II. Second, The Power Of The Spirit Is Experienced In Community.**

The irony of this is that we have forgotten or never learned that the context in which John offers this word of hope from Jesus is meant to be in community. This is the subtle catch in this gospel. John is insistent in this regard, for his incessant use of the plural word “you.” Whenever Jesus says the word “you” in this passage, he is speaking to the importance of the Spirit coming to the entire community.

This is the most difficult message for us to hear, especially in today’s world. We have been taught that religion, especially as it has been presented to us in North America, is the private issue of the individual. But this cannot be further from the intentions of Jesus and the early Church. Faith issues are not a private affair. They are to be expressed, shared, taught, learned, experienced and known in the company of believers. The Church is the visible, viable expression of what it means to be Christian, and cannot be understood personally or privately apart from this understanding. Gail R. O’Day, Professor of Homiletics at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, and editor to The New Interpreters Bible, says it this way:

“As the farewell discourse is at pains to make clear, Jesus’ death will not leave the disciples orphaned, because Jesus and God will send the Paraclete (that is, the Greek word for the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Advocate) to the believing community...What is critical about the promise of the Paraclete is that Jesus and God send the Paraclete to the *community*, not to individuals...The Paraclete is not a private possession, nor is its presence discernible as an internal experience of the individual believer. The Paraclete is given to and known in the community.”<sup>2</sup>

According to John’s Gospel, the Christian can only experience this gift of the Holy Spirit as it is lived out in the life of the believing community of faith. When we get together, we are given the presence of the Holy Spirit, which sustains us in the absence of the human Jesus. And this Spirit is at work most profoundly in the life of the believing community who has gathered in the name of the Living Christ. But wait! That’s not all!

### **III. Finally, The Work Of The Spirit Is To Remind Us Of What Jesus Taught.**

The most difficult thing for us to remember is that Jesus taught us what life was to be like as the community of believers living in the midst of the world. We aren’t citizens of this world, but rather we are citizens of the Kingdom, and as such, we know to whom we hold our allegiance. Even the Spirit does not draw attention to itself. It is as James Packer once wrote:

It is as if the Spirit stands behind us, throwing light over our shoulder on to Jesus who stands facing us. The Spirit’s message to us is never, “Look at me; listen to me; come to me; get to know me”, but always, “Look at him, and see his glory; listen to him and hear his word; go to him and have life; get to know him and taste his gift of joy and peace.” The Spirit, we might say, is the matchmaker, the celestial marriage broker, whose role it is to bring us and Christ together and ensure that we stay together.<sup>3</sup>

To be the community of believers is to know who lives at the center of the community, and that is the one who gave birth to the community through Jesus Christ, and who breathed into it through the Holy Spirit. As the community of believers, we are sustained by the Holy Spirit, but we are also given the gift of being reminded of what Jesus taught us.

As a pastor, I cannot tell you how many times I have sat with a family who is struggling to cope with the loss of a loved one, only to come to recognize that when the family gathers around, the memories of the loved one flow graciously, and we are reminded of the great love that one has shared with all of us. When the body of Christ has gathered, we are celebrating the life that still sustains us through the remembrances of the teachings of Christ. Every time the worshipping community comes together, we are united in the remembrances of Christ and his great grace. That is what we will do in just a few moments when we all gather around his table. We remember because of the Holy Spirit.

*“We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.”*

This is our Constitutive Faith. We believe in One Spirit. And this spirit has been given to us to sustain us in Jesus’ absence, to draw us together into community, and to remind us of all Jesus has taught us. Knowing and believing this makes us stronger Christians. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Andrew D. Rogness, “Journeying Through Lent with Matthew”, Augsburg, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Gail R. O’Day, “Excursus on the Paraclete,” *The New Interpreters Bible*, Vol. IX, p. 776.

<sup>3</sup> James Packer, *Your Father Loves You*, Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986.