

Advent of the Holy Spirit: Indwelling
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
June 1, 2014
Rev. John Cleghorn

John 14:15-27

If there were ever a mortal within whom the Holy Spirit dwelt, it was the late Maya Angelou.

The statuesque poet-dancer-actor-activist who taught at Wake Forest University and touched millions with her words died this week, as you may know from the news. If you ever read her poetry or heard her speak, you knew her human spirit walked with something that came from the beyond.

Dr. Angelou broke into the public conscience in the 1960s with her memoir of her survival from being raped at age 8. Her distinct touch with the English language and her messages of empowerment, encouragement and liberation clearly demonstrated that she and the Divine shared an intimate bond.

On Tuesday, this regal, courageous, invincible soul gave the world one last shot of wisdom, her final public words, in the form of a tweet.

She wrote: "Listen to yourself and in that quietude you might hear the voice of God."

Last Sunday here at Caldwell, we took up a three-week time to reflect on God's gift of the Holy Spirit – how that Spirit brings to completion our triune God and how the Holy Spirit dwells around us and yes, even within us, as Maya Angelou knew.

We take up this time as an unofficial season of expectation, an advent, or coming, of the Holy Spirit. Our reading in John's Gospel today comes from scripture's account of those days the risen Christ appeared to his followers before his ascension. Jesus promised his followers an advocate, the Holy Spirit, as one who would come in his place to walk with them – and us – always.

You've heard my collective confession before. Namely, that we Presbyterians, we frozen chosen, we people who tend to live in our heads more than our hearts, can be accused at times of failing to give this aspect of the Godhead full credit. That is the same, we should admit, as if we are taking a great gift for granted.

But the Holy Spirit has always been there for God's people. Even in the creation accounts of Genesis, the Holy Spirit is the wind that breathes life into creation. In the Old Testament, it is the Holy Spirit that inspires God's people to express themselves in

art, in culture and in wisdom. And throughout both testaments, the Spirit is especially on the side of those on the margins, “the helpless, the poor, the wretched and oppressed because they have been forgotten or excluded by the rich and powerful.”¹ How many of us have known someone whose life seemingly would have no hope otherwise, but who find the strength to go on in the Holy Spirit?

Theologian and teacher Shirley Guthrie wrote a timeless guide to faith with a deceptively understated title of Christian Doctrine. I recommend it for anyone who is intentional about their faith journey. In it, he advises that believers avoid the risk of depersonalizing the Holy Spirit. He writes:

A frequent but badly mistaken analogy is to think of the Spirit as something like electricity: If we can somehow be “plugged in” to God, a “power” will flow into us that makes the light shine in our hearts or “recharges our batteries.” Such an analogy depersonalizes the Holy Spirit, and it depersonalizes human beings. The Spirit is not some magical “something” that gets into us but SOMEONE who comes to dwell in us and among us. Nor are human beings objects like light bulbs or batteries to be “turned on” and controlled by some outside force; they are thinking, willing, feeling, persons. We can avoid all kinds of superstitious ideas about the Holy Spirit if we think of the Spirit’s relationship with us as a personal relationship between God and ourselves.²

It is, we should note, a particular kind of person within God that the Spirit represents, Guthrie goes on to say. The Hebrew word for Spirit is *ruach* and it is a feminine noun. As we will hear in next week’s traditional Pentecost reading from Acts, it is the Spirit that gives birth to the church, and that is more than a metaphor. The Spirit is that maternal side of God who nurtures the church and its members, who abides with us as a mother who will never leave or forget her own flesh and blood.

There is an intimacy the Holy Spirit brings to our relationship with the Divine that we don’t necessarily find in God the Creator or God in Christ, the Redeemer. In fact, intimacy may not quite capture it for, as we heard in today’s reading from John, the Spirit dwells not just with us but in us.

‘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. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. (John 14:20)

¹ Guthrie, p. 292

² p. 292

This is where I have my moments of struggle, as I confessed last week in my blog. I have utterly no doubt that God watches over me, as with us all, in the most personal way. I don't put a gap in between me and the God who created me.

It's the *within* part that I sometimes struggle with. As I said on the blog, it seems to me that the Holy Spirit would have far better places to hang out than within me. A friend who knows my faith is quick to give me a hard time about this struggle.

When I say or write something about how the human condition is "broken," this person responds with a reminder along the lines of that old saying that "God don't make no junk." When I remind this person that the Hebrew for Adam, the first representative of humanity, translates as "dirt boy," this person says I sound like a medieval monk who lashes himself with a barbed rope to remind myself of how low I am. When I say that the Psalms say we are all just "worms," this person rolls their eyes and throws up their hands in complete loss for words.

Ok, I don't really think I am a worm, at least most days. Let's just say I have a healthy awareness of my shortcomings and failures. Nonetheless, there it is. Jesus says it, as recorded in the Fourth Gospel.

'And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, **and he will be in you.**

So there it is. Jesus says the Spirit dwells within those who keep his commandments to love others as Jesus would. And who am I to argue with Jesus?

So what does it mean that the Holy Spirit dwells within us? What does that look like? It looks like the way that Jesus lived his life, says Shirley Guthrie, the theologian I mentioned. This is not as some untouchable pious uppity-up but as a person who lived a real life that was guided by the Holy Spirit. Listen to what Guthrie writes:

(Jesus) is our prime example of what it means to be a Spirit-filled person. What kind of life is that? It is not the kind of life people in his time (as in our time?) expected of a "spiritual" person. Rather, it was the life of a person who went to parties, ate and drank, had a good time. He talked more about what people did with their money than about their sexual purity ... Jesus was the friend and companion not just of the morally pure and pious but of immoral, unbelieving sinners. He defended the cause of those who were rejected and despised by polite society and the religious and political establishment He trusted and served the God he called Father even when it did not pay off in his personal success and happiness, even when it meant giving up his own life for unworthy,

no-good sinners. His life was the life of one who prayed even when everything he had worked and hoped for was denied him and he felt forsaken by God. That is the kind of life that is the result of God's Holy Spirit coming to dwell in a person.³

In other words, the Holy Spirit's indwelling enables us to endure, to conquer our challenges and transcend our circumstances, just as it helped Maya Angelou transcend her tragic childhood. This is the gift of God.

And as with any theological question, we should ask: What response does God expect of us?

Once again, friends, we find that we need not overcomplicate some aspects of our faith. As mysterious as it is, it is also clear. God gave us Jesus to mediate God's love on earth in ways we can see and understand. Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit for us to mediate Jesus' love to us and to the world. And the Spirit abides in us as long as we love others as Jesus did, keeping Jesus' commandments to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, strength and mind and loving others as we love ourselves.

Hear again Maya Angelou's last public words: "Listen to yourself and in that quietude you might hear the voice of God."

How is it that a person comes into that kind of intimate relationship with the Almighty?

Dr. Angelou was in many ways the poet laureate of our time, but she was more than just a poet. She was also highly involved in the Civil Rights Movement. She held friendships with Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Coretta Scott King, and Nelson Mandela. She coordinated King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and also fought against South African apartheid. In 2013, she told an interviewer it was her faith in God that enabled her to do all these things.

"I found that I knew not only that there was God but that I was a child of God, when I understood that, when I comprehended that, more than that, when I internalized that, ingested that, I became courageous," she told the New Orleans Times Picayune.

"If God loves me," she said, "then what is it I can't do?"

In the name of the God who, through love, abides and dwells within us in the Holy Spirit, enabling us – even you and me – to do all things, Amen.

³ p. 295