

The First Mennonite Church of Vineland
“Holy Spirit, Holy What?”
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Words matter. As a child, I was teased. A lot. And in hindsight it would be more accurate to say I was bullied. I remember clearly, one of the pieces of advice I was given, unhelpfully, was that “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” And while I appreciate the sentiment, the reality is that words matter. Words can, and do, hurt.

The church uses a lot of words. Whether it’s prayers, scripture readings, liturgical words, homilies, sermons or even regular reports. The church uses a lot of words. We use words to describe our faith, we use words to defend our faith, we use words to affirm and encourage, we use words to reprove, correct, confess, convert, or care.

And because the church uses so many words, it behooves the church to use her words carefully and well. Unfortunately, the church hasn’t always done a good job of being mindful of her words. The church has used words to exclude, minimize, dehumanize and even silence. The church has, at times, used their words, whether intentionally or unintentionally, to harm.

Ultimately, though, we use words to communicate. To communicate how we understand faith; to communicate our experiences of the divine, and to communicate our vision and hope for the future. Sometimes, though, it’s tricky. Because sometimes the church uses a word and assumes that everyone knows what they’re talking about. This can also get us into trouble. Assumed meanings rarely turn out well.

We learned a bit about this this past Lent, where I took on the 7-week task to reframe, and hopefully, redeem the word ‘Sin.’ Sin, for so long, had an assumed meaning, and it carried with it a lot of baggage. Baggage, which often colours opinions, interpretations, and creates presumptions. A big part of the preparation and extra words used in that Lent series was finding ways to attend to some of this baggage.

The church has a very particular vernacular, a vocabulary, it’s sometimes known as “Christian-ese.” You’re familiar with it, I can drop a word in a sermon like salvation, and for most of us, we’re comfortable hearing it, and although the exact meaning has, perhaps, been changed over time, generally, we have a common understanding of what I might be talking about. Although for newcomers or new believers, “Christian-ese” can be a barrier, because it means, in some ways, learning a different language.

For example, I could even use a sentence like: the ontological revelation of Jesus as Messiah is a profound unveiling of His divine essence and purpose, signifying His eternal nature and unique role as the incarnate Son of God who bridges the gap between humanity and the divine. And I would imagine that, generally, many have a sense of what's being said, though to an outsider their eyes may gloss over. (Thank you, ChatGPT, for making that statement ridiculously complicated, and for making my point)

There are a lot of words that we use that one may consider to be jargon. We sometimes use these words as crutches; they're especially helpful when we don't want, or in some case, know, to explain a complicated concept. However, in using some of this jargon, we rely on assumed meanings.

Our summer worship is going to look at some of these "Christian-ese" words that we use. Hopefully, peeling back the layers of baggage and assumed meanings to breathe some new life into these words. We're going to look at the origins of these words and learn how they're heard today. Perhaps, we might be able to breathe some new life into these oft familiar words.

This week being Pentecost, we're going to begin with the Holy Spirit.

One activity that we're going to try for this series is to, in real-time, build a word cloud each week. This is going to be one of the few times that I'm going to actively encourage you to get your smartphones out during the sermon. On the screen you'll see a prompt: "When I hear 'Holy Spirit,' I think of..." Now there should be a link there, with a code to type in, and that 'should' take you to a page where you can enter your answer to the prompt, and feel free to answer multiple times, and at the end of the sermon, we're going to have a look and see what we've created. With that said, let's explore the 'Holy Spirit'

Anabaptist Mennonites don't give a lot of attention to the Holy Spirit. Perhaps it's because we're far too practical a people to pay much attention to a 'ghost.' Maybe it's because we don't know what to do with an aspect of God that leans closer to the supernatural than it does to the concrete, like, say, Jesus. Maybe it's because in our post-enlightenment culture, unless it can be quantified, studied or fact-checked, it doesn't hold up under academic scrutiny. Or maybe it's just that we don't know what to do with it. All would be fair reasons why we don't emphasize the Holy Spirit much, save for Pentecost Sunday.

It's hard to define the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit manifests itself in so many different ways in Scripture: it's a dove, a tongue of fire, it's breath, and wind. And it goes by so many different names. So what do we mean when we talk about the Holy Spirit.

Going back to the original languages, in the Hebrew, the word for Spirit, is *Ruach*, or if we're talking about the Spirit of God, it's *Ruach Elohim*. *Ruach* is best defined as Spirit, wind, or breath. However, it can also mean exhalation, or life. The other ways the Old Testament refers to the Holy Spirit is Ruach YHWH (Spirit of Yahweh), and the Ruach Hakodesh (Holy Spirit).

In Greek, the word is *Pneuma*, think Pneumatic, and is found, roughly, around 385 times in the New Testament.¹ It's defined as blowing, breath, life, spirit, soul. My greek lexicon has 5 pages dedicated to ascribing meaning to *Pneuma*. It's thought that Jesus' reference to the Spirit, *pneuma*, builds on the OT understanding of Holy Spirit when he talks about Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of Truth, and the Paraclete, sometimes understood as the Helper, Comforter or Advocate.

Later on, 'Holy Spirit' "was generally translated into the Vulgate as *Spiritus* and *Spiritus Sanctus*. The English terms "Holy Ghost" and "Holy Spirit" are complete synonyms: one derives from the Old English *gast* and the other from the Latin loanword *spiritus*. Like *pneuma*, they both refer to the breath, to its animating power, and to the soul. The Old English term is shared by all other Germanic languages (compare, e.g., the German *Geist*) and it is older; the King James Bible typically uses "Holy Ghost". Beginning in the 20th century, translations overwhelmingly prefer "Holy Spirit", partly because the general English term "ghost" has increasingly come to refer only to the spirit of a dead person."²

With all these different names, I wonder if we need to broaden our usage; we certainly have options when it comes to names. Whether it's the Spirit of God, the Breath of God, Spirit of Christ, perhaps these might be considerations. However, for the sake of familiarity and consistency, I will use 'Holy Spirit', however inaccurate it is, for the duration of this reflection.

The Holy Spirit's appearance in the Biblical story isn't limited to Pentecost Sunday, The Holy Spirit is present at the beginning of Creation, in vs. 2 of Genesis 1 we read:

¹ "Holy Spirit in Christianity." *Wikipedia*, The Free Encyclopedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_Spirit_in_Christianity. Accessed June 5, 2025.

² Ibid.

the earth was without shape or form, it was dark over the deep sea, and God's wind swept over the waters³

This is followed shortly by God's voice, speaking creation into being. God's breath, God's breath of life, also plays an important role in Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones,

He said to me, "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, Dry bones, hear the Lord's word! The Lord God proclaims to these bones: I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again. I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin. When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the Lord."

He said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, human one! Say to the breath, The Lord God proclaims: Come from the four winds, breath! Breathe into these dead bodies and let them live."⁴

However, the Holy Spirit isn't just air, it manifests in different ways. Consider the story of Jesus' baptism. All three of the synoptic gospels (that is Matthew, Mark, and Luke), have similar accounts of Jesus coming up from the water and: "the Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove"⁵ And, in our scripture reading to day, in addition to being a violent wind, the Holy Spirit arrives as divided tongues of fire, resting upon the heads of the disciples. So, whether it's fire or air, it makes me wonder, or imagine, that there might be something elemental about the Holy Spirit.

And this ties into a question that Randy asked me as we were talking about this service today, "What's the point of the Holy Spirit?"

And that got me thinking a bit about the Holy Spirit's role.

Helmut Harder, in his study guide for the Confession of Faith from a Mennonite Perspective, writes of the Holy Spirit in this way:

³ Genesis 1:2, CEB

⁴ Ezekiel 37:4, 9, CEB

⁵ Luke 3:22, CEB

“If we knew only of God, the Almighty One or the Father, we might think of God as only a distant divine authoritative being who sits high above the universe. If we knew only God as the Son, we might think of God only as a historical figure who was among us for a brief thirty years some 2000 years ago. Knowing God as Holy Spirit, we are assured that God is near to us in a continuing way day by day. The Holy Spirit as the eternal Spirit of God is always with us.”⁶

And it's this 'presence with' which I think is essential. Since Pentecost, the Holy Spirit has been present with and to Christ's church, both the Church as a whole, and to the individuals who make up the Church, leading, guiding, shaping, correcting, adapting, transforming, all to be the Church that God is calling it to be. The Holy Spirit continues to be present.

It's this continued presence which is how we as a Church know God to be present. It's through and with Holy Spirit which God works in our lives and in the life of the Church. And we know this because of the way that the Fruits of the Spirit are present in our lives; these fruits of the Spirit are the manifestations of God's continued presence as the Holy Spirit with and in us; the gathered Church, the congregation, the Body of Christ.

The Holy Spirit isn't just some phantom; it's not a Holy 'Ghost' as the old English was wont to say. The Holy Spirit, also, isn't some abstract creation to explain or justify our instincts. Looking back to the original languages, I think, for the sake of simplicity, the Church (and the English language) might have limited our vocabulary, naming the Holy Spirit as we did. It is God's breath of life which is moving in the Church today. Like wind, it's always moving, never still. It is God's breath of life that stirs up new ideas, fresh ways of living, moving, and being. Following Jesus, it is God's breath of life that breathes into the still pages of Scripture and brings them to life. It is God's breath of life, which we see manifest in each other and the world as the Fruits of the Spirit.

I don't think the Holy Spirit is some esoteric, abstract faith concept; and while, we as Anabaptist Mennonites might not make a big deal about the Holy Spirit, I believe that the Holy Spirit, God's Breath of Life, manifest in doves, flames, and wind, is God's continued presence with God's people; the gathered Church; the Body of Christ. And even though I'll still use 'Holy Spirit' to speak of God's Breath of Life, I will do so with a much broader understanding.

Amen

⁶ Harder, Helmut. 1997. Understanding the Faith from a Mennonite Perspective : A Study Guide. Winnipeg: CMBC Publications. pg 12.

Sending Blessing

And now, as you leave this place,

May God's Breath of Life,
fill you with new life, today and every day,

May God's Continuing Presence,
comfort and sustain you,

May God's Spirit of Truth,
inspire and motivate you,

Go in peace, to love and serve God.

Amen