

Scripture Readings for June 12, 2022

John 14:16-17, 25-27¹

[Jesus said] “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ 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.

²⁵ ‘I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

Romans 8:11, 14-16

¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

Acts 2:17-18, 21

¹⁷ “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Matthew 28: 18-20

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

¹ See also John 15:26-27; 15:17; 16:7, 13-15.

Sermon: We Believe in The Holy Spirit

The first three of the four “We believe” statements in the Nicene Creed all pertain to the Christian understanding of God. Let me remind you of them:

We believe in one God, the Father,²
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,³
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life.

You will immediately notice that both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are designated as “Lord.” I mentioned a few weeks ago that the word “Lord” is the Greek translation of “YHWH,” the personal name of God in the Old Testament that was revealed to Moses at the burning bush.⁴ Paul and Peter, in designating the risen Jesus as “Lord,” had come to understand that Jesus was somehow God and therefore it wasn’t blasphemous to actually worship Jesus.⁵ The Creed also gives the title Lord to the Holy Spirit, indicating that the Spirit too is divine. Consequently, the Creed is thoroughly *trinitarian* even if that word is not mentioned. I have spoken on the Trinity several times before,⁶ so I won’t pursue that again today. This week in our series on the Nicene Creed, we focus on the last proclamation:

“We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father.
With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets.”

In addition to “Lord,” the Holy Spirit is described as the “Giver of Life.” This can be understood in two distinctive ways. First, the writer of Genesis relates the story of the creation of Adam, saying: “The LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and *breathed* into his nostrils *the breath of life*, and the man became a living being.”⁷ The Hebrew for “breath” is the same word for “spirit” and so the divine Spirit was involved in animating life in the clay man that God the Father and Jesus the Son had made.⁸ Second, as we heard in our reading from Romans, Paul speaks of the Spirit of God “*who raised Jesus from the dead.*” And this again speaks of the Holy Spirit as Life Giver in the context of the resurrection. Jesus was truly dead and so obviously could not resurrect himself; that was an act of the Holy Spirit. But more than that, Paul links that powerful, life-giving work of the Spirit to you and me, both in this life and in the life to come.⁹

² See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/We-Believe-in-God.pdf> .

³ See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/We-Believe-in-Jesus-Part-1.pdf> ;
<https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/We-Believe-in-Jesus-Part-2.pdf> ,

⁴ See Exod 2. The Greek word for Lord (*kyrios*) is widely used in the LXX translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

⁵ See 1 Cor 8:6; Rom 10:9; Phil 2:11.

⁶ See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/The-Trinity-The-God-We-Didnt-Want.pdf> ;
<https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Three-in-One-and-One-in-Three.pdf> .

⁷ Gen 2:7. See also Job 33:4.

⁸ Obviously, Jews don’t believe Jesus was involved in creation; Christians do, see Col 1:15-17; Heb 1:1b; John 1:1-3.

⁹ See Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 3:16; 15:22, 36, 45. See also 1 Pet 3:18; John 6:63; and <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Life-in-the-Spirit.pdf> .

To reiterate, to say that the Holy spirit is “Lord” is to say that the Spirit is divine. And to say that the Spirit is the “Life Giver” is stating something that can only be ascribed to God, and consequently that statement too implies that the Holy Spirit is divine. In case we fail to make that connection, we’re then told the Holy Spirit “*proceeds* from the Father.”¹⁰ The word “proceed” means “to come *out* from one place to *go* to another.” While it seems a weird expression here, the Creed’s writers were simply quoting from John’s Gospel where Jesus says to his disciples, “The Comforter, the Spirit of truth, who *goes out from* the Father—he will testify about me.”¹¹ So just as the Son is “begotten” of the Father so too the Spirit “comes out” of the Father. Both the Son and the Spirit were, then, *not made* by God but their source is *of* God and are therefore themselves divine.

Just in case we find that language of procession confusing or unconvincing, the Creed then states, “With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.” This again underlines that the Holy Spirit is *not* a creature but is divine. That being the case, it’s appropriate for the Spirit to receive worship from humans in precisely the same way as the Father and the Son. Remember, the first commandment is very clear: God alone is worthy of worship, worshiping anything else is idolatry. Yet even some Christians find this notion of worshiping the Holy Spirit a bit disturbing.¹² Worshiping God and Jesus the Son is more straightforward; is it really appropriate to *worship* the Spirit? Perhaps one reason we find this so troubling is that we often regard the Holy Spirit as impersonal, it’s an enabling or a transforming *power*, a *life-force*.¹³ And to be fair, there are many references to the Spirit as a “power” in the New Testament.¹⁴ But as we heard earlier from John’s Gospel,¹⁵ the Holy Spirit is also called the Comforter, the Helper, or the Advocate and so is referred to as a *person*. And with that important insight, we are better able to appreciate in a new way the richness of the inner, trinitarian life of God.¹⁶ That being the case, it *is* appropriate for Jesus and the Spirit to be *worshipped* along with the Father, for we believe in One God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - and we shouldn’t attempt to fragment the Trinity. Understandably, Jews and Muslims consider this to be blasphemy.

¹⁰ I am deliberately *not* addressing the important *filioque* (“and the son” – in Latin) question here for reasons of simplicity.

¹¹ See John 15:26. In the New Testament there is no comprehensive or precise teaching concerning the Holy Spirit. The Nicene theologians did their best to draw from the diverse texts available in order to state those things on which they agreed.

¹² The New Testament itself does not use the language of worship in connection with the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless the risen Lord Jesus does receive worship, and there are other examples where Jesus is worshipped too, such as the wise men (Matt 2:2, 8, 11; NIV), in the account of Jesus walking on the water (Matt 14:33), Jesus healing a man born blind (John 9:38), and the risen Jesus (Matt 28:9, 17).

¹³ Incidentally, the term “Holy” distinguishes the *source* of the Spirit as being of God or transcendent. Hence the transforming power of the Spirit comes from *outside* of ourselves and of the created order. This gradual transformation is why the Holy Spirit is also called the Sanctifier (see also Gal 5:22-23; Rom 1:4).

¹⁴ See, for example, Rom 15:13, 19; 1 Thess 1:5; 2 Tim 1:7; Acts 1:8. In the gospels we see the Holy Spirit as a power coming upon Jesus at his baptism that enables him to do miracles, exorcisms, and to speak prophetically.

¹⁵ See John 14:16–17, 26; 15:26; 16:7–11. John’s distinctive word for the Spirit is “*Paraclete*.”

¹⁶ In light of what we consider to be God’s own self disclosure, Christians think of the oneness of God not *only* terms of *singleness*, as do Jews and Muslims, but also in terms of *unity*: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Creed's concluding affirmation concerning the Holy Spirit is: "He has spoken through the prophets." The Christian community therefore believes the Holy Spirit inspired the Old Testament writers.¹⁷ Indeed, their writings have been preserved because the broader faith community discerned, by the same divine Spirit, that their message was God's words speaking into their specific situations. This notion of Spirit-inspired "prophecy" assumes that the Creator God seeks to communicate with creatures made in his image and is able to use the perceptions, imaginations, and words of humans to make explicit God's desires. That is what the Creed boldly proclaims in: "He has spoken through the prophets," and onlookers and critics are prone to find this idea crazy or irrational.

But that Christian conviction is that's *not* the end of the story. You'll remember that Luke tells us in Acts how God lavishly poured out his Spirit at Pentecost upon ordinary men, women, young, and old.¹⁸ I'll come back to that in a moment. As we heard in one of our earlier readings, a key element of that Pentecost experience was bestowing the spirit of *prophecy*.¹⁹ A prophet is *not* someone with a reputation for foretelling the future, rather it's a person who is known for speaking God's timely words *into* a specific situation. This is immediately demonstrated in Peter's first sermon in Acts.²⁰

Notice that the Creed's statement, "He *has* spoken through the prophets," is in the *past* tense. It *is* a true statement, but I believe that God *still* communicates through prophetic figures today and so it should be re-worded to: "He *speaks* through the prophets." For example, consider Martin Luther King Jr.'s inspirational "*I Have a Dream*" speech. As we reflect on those powerful words we can ask, "Is this the kind of thing that *God* would have said?" Does it resonate with God's values and does it speak into that specific situation, of segregation and racism in America. Many – including me - would say a resounding "YES," in which case Martin Luther King Jr. is not *just* a motivational speaker, he's a *prophetic* speaker. That *doesn't* mean that *everything* that he ever said was therefore inspired by God - and that's where discernment is necessary.²¹ The same would be true about Desmond Tutu and his speaking out against Apartheid in South Africa. In both of those examples, these men were advocating for social justice and that's certainly in-keeping with the spirit of the Old Testament prophets, like Amos. The same can be said about Wilberforce and the abolition of slavery. And it's true for LGBTQ rights and the rights and roles of women.

¹⁷ See 2 Tim 3:16-17; Heb 1:1-4. Again, there is a continuity between the New and Old Testaments.

¹⁸ See Acts 2 and <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/What-Does-This-Mean.pdf> ; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/The-God-of-New-Beginnings-.pdf> ; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/God%E2%80%99s-Spirit-is-Given-Lavishly-to-His-People.pdf> . Later (in Acts 10-11) the Spirit was dramatically given to non-Jews: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/God%E2%80%99s-Outside-The-Box-Thinking.pdf> .

¹⁹ Acts 2:17-18. This enables the apostles to continue the kingdom ministry of Jesus; see [12].

²⁰ Acts 2:14-36. Consequently, Christians also believe the Holy Spirit inspired the *New* Testament writers. Moreover, one sign of the effectiveness of a prophet is the audience's response (Acts 2:37-47). However, a positive response is not "proof" as such because the prophetic message can be rejected by the audience and still be true (Matt 10:14; Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5).

²¹ 1 John 4:1-6; 1 Cor 2: 16; Phil 2: 5; Rom 12:1-2. Spiritual maturity is about knowing "the mind of Christ" as well ethical behavior.

The Christian conviction is that the living God *continues* to be revealed through creation, through inspired writings, and through our *ongoing* experience of the Holy Spirit. The church's *discernment* of the Spirit must include listening to voices of prophets from within, for those people are raised up in every age to challenge the church to greater integrity, and by so challenging, to also reform and build up the church. Sometimes we silence those *internal* voices and therefore God's Spirit will inspire people from *outside* of the church to speak prophetically *to* the church.²² May we recognize such voices today.

This brings us back to the church's experience at that first Pentecost. Luke tells us that the followers of the risen Jesus were confused. Last week I mentioned that the two on the road to Emmaus were bewildered because they didn't understand Christ's suffering and resurrection in the context of the Old Testament; so Jesus explained those connections to them.²³ In Acts 1, Luke writes that the risen Jesus presented himself alive to his followers "by many convincing proofs" for a period of 40 days.²⁴ Jesus also recapped his kingdom message to make sure they had it straight.²⁵ However the disciples' muddled thinking is revealed in their question: "Lord, is this the time when you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?"²⁶ They were still thinking of the kingdom of God in purely geopolitical terms, in terms of power, prestige, and looking back to the good old days of King David. Moments later Luke tells us the ascension occurred and they were left wondering *where* Jesus had gone to and *why* he had left at all.²⁷ Yet it was to such people that the Holy Spirit came. The Spirit comes to us where we are at, in our confusion and grief. John's Gospel calls the Holy Spirit the "Comforter" with good reason. As I mentioned earlier, at Pentecost the Spirit came upon *ordinary* men, women, young and old; they *weren't* noted for their holiness, only for their timidity and mixed-up thinking. But the Spirit gradually transformed them into new community that made a difference to those within it, so much so that it was noticed by those outside of it - like a beacon on a hill.²⁸

The other thing about Pentecost is that it shows us that God is *not* finished with us yet. God is writing new chapters; divine revelation *continues* through Spirit-filled followers everywhere – including you and me. In a very real sense, the Holy Spirit's presence is our link to the risen Christ, just as it was for the early church.²⁹ Jesus told his followers, "The Helper, 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."³⁰ It's because of the Holy Spirit - the Comforter, Helper, and Counselor who is *from* God and who *abiding* with us - that Jesus

²² The Spirit of God always goes ahead of the church and is not the prerogative of the church (see Acts 10:1-8, 30-48).

²³ See Luke 24:25-27.

²⁴ See Acts 1:3.

²⁵ Acts 1:3b. See also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/He-Ascended-into-Heaven.pdf> .

²⁶ Acts 1:6.

²⁷ Acts 1:11. John 16:7 reports Jesus as saying: "Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."

²⁸ They would have been happy to keep it local (in Jerusalem) but persecution dispersed them and the gospel spread and new communities were formed. (See the book of Acts.)

²⁹ John 15:26.

³⁰ John 14:26.

was able to reassure his followers with these words, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. . . Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”³¹

In conclusion, the Nicene Creed simply reminds us of what we believe to be true about God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That doesn’t mean that there isn’t more to God than portrayed in this trinitarian language.³² We obviously can’t know everything about the divine mystery, but *this* we believe by faith. And that faith seeks further understanding.³³ Amen. Let us pray.

³¹ John 14:27.

³² See Rom 11:33-36.

³³ Reason seeks out the logic embedded in God’s revelation. If the experience of our hearts and the language of scripture demands a more complex apprehension of the God we worship, then our rational thought must follow. (We don’t have to approach the Trinity as a mathematical problem to be solved: “How can 1 be 3”? Rather, we explore the revealed-yet-mysterious inner life of God as a community.)