



A Trinitarian Life

Chapter 21

Grateful Enjoyment of Your Abundant Creation

God the Father and Creation Care

We give you thanks, most gracious God, for the beauty of earth and sky and sea; for the richness of mountains, plains, and rivers; for the songs of birds and the loveliness of flowers. We praise you for these good gifts, and pray that we may safeguard them for our posterity. Grant that we may continue to grow in our grateful enjoyment of your abundant creation,

to the honor and glory of your Name,
now and for ever. *Amen.*

—*The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 840

One Sunday—and one Sunday only—each year, the church celebrates a doctrine. On the Sunday after the Day of Pentecost, we focus on the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity. We sing hymns and hear preaching about God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: the Holy Trinity. If you wanted to pick a good Sunday to hear a heretical sermon, you'd do well to pick this Sunday. You see, it's pretty common for preachers to make the mistake of trying to simplify the Holy Trinity. And in our efforts to downsize the

ineffable into something we can grasp, we almost always mess it up.

We are much better off leaving the Holy Trinity as a divine mystery, something that we enter into with joy and a bit of uncertainty. Without trying to boil the whole thing down to a bumper sticker, there are a few things we can say about the Holy Trinity. At its core, the Holy Trinity reveals that our God is a God of relationship. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in a beautiful, careful, and timeless dance. The Holy Trinity reveals to us that God is unity, diversity, and majesty. The Holy Trinity keeps us from making the mistake of reducing God to something comprehensible, to a God that our brains

can hold.

For much of its history, the church has preferred to speak of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. In recent decades, feminist theologians have rightly pointed out that this places limits on our understanding of God. If we only ever speak of God as Father, we run the risk of beginning to think that God is literally male. Theologians agree that God is not a male or a female but rather transcends human gender, and a growing tradition seeks to enrich our speech about God, including addressing God as Mother. This is not completely new: Julian of Norwich (c. 1342 to c.

1416) spoke of God as Mother. This perspective can help us expand our understanding of God.

Some people today prefer to avoid all pronouns for God, using instead functional descriptions for God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. This de-personalizes God in a way that does not resonate with the scriptures, and it also limits our understanding of God to particular functions for the persons of God. The scriptures say that God the Son, for example, is involved in our creation, redemption, and sanctification, so we wouldn't want to limit Jesus to only redeemer.

If all this seems confusing, it is. The Holy Trinity is not meant to be easy to grasp, and if we put it in a box we can hold, we confine God to the limits of our minds. We do well to savor what is best about the traditional language for God, even as we look for fresh ways to speak of God.

With this chapter, we begin a three-part exploration of the Christian life. These are, admittedly, artificial constructions, but they can still be a helpful guide to exploring the Trinity and our life in faith. This chapter will look at the connections between God as Creator and our enjoyment of and care for God's creation.

Next, we will look at God in Christ—the Incarnate Son—and implications for our understanding of humanity and our treatment of others. Finally, we turn to God as Spirit, thinking about how our relationship with the Holy Spirit might inform our discernment and exercise of spiritual gifts.

God as Creator

To start, we begin at the beginning. Our understanding of creation is grounded in the idea that God is the creator. We profess in our creeds that God the Father has created all that is, and we affirm that the

eternal Christ was present and active in the creation also. Indeed, the church also teaches that the Holy Spirit hovered at the moment of creation. The entire Trinity lovingly brought the universe into being and life into the world.

If you open a Bible and start reading, you will immediately encounter the story of God creating the universe (begin reading at Genesis 1:1, page one of any Bible!). In the story, we read again and again that God saw creation as good. God saw the light, the land and sea, the plants, the stars, and the animals. And they were all good. When God created people, they were created, male and female, in God's

very image and likeness. And God saw that they were very good.

When God created people, God said to them that they should multiply. God also gave them dominion over the animals. Some Christians have read this to mean that people have unbridled power to use or to destroy animals for their pleasure alone, but this reading does not stand up to scrutiny. For one thing, this whole story takes place before the Fall—the moment when sin crept into human existence. At this point in the story, people have not sinned against God or God's creation. No selfish acts would be possible. Also, it's important to read the word dominion in a biblical context. While it's true that

dominion means to rule over, it is also true that the Bible almost always sets out an ideal for rulers who are just and compassionate. God elevates mercy as the ideal, not absolute power.

To tell the story of the biblical view of creation is, in a way, to tell the entire story of the Bible. God gives people the earth, along with its fruits and animals, to use and care for. Later in the story, God obliterates almost every person and animal because of their flagrant and endemic sin. In the various laws, God constrains the use of the land, especially in ways that ensure the poor are cared for. Fields are to be left fallow every seven years so the land can rest, but the poor are

to be given access to the gleanings—the leftovers—of these fields.

Psalm 19 begins, "The heavens declare the glory of God." In Psalm 8, verses 4-5, the writer praises God, saying, "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have set in their courses; what is man that you should be mindful of him, the son of man that you should seek him out?" Psalm 148 is a raucous hymn of praise in which the whole created order joins in the hymn.

Hallelujah!

Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights.

Praise him, all you angels of his;
praise him, all his host.

Praise him, sun and moon
praise him, all you shining stars.

Praise him, heaven of heavens,
and you waters above the heavens.

Let them praise the Name of the Lord;
For he commanded and they were
created.

And he made them stand fast for ever
and ever;

he gave them a law which shall not
pass away.

Praise the Lord from the earth,
you sea-monsters and all deeps;

Fire and hail, snow and fog,
tempestuous wind doing his will;
Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars;
Wild beasts and all cattle,
creeping things and winged birds;
Kings of the earth and all peoples,
princes and all rulers of the world;
Young men and maidens,
old and young together.
Let them praise the Name of the Lord,
for his Name only is exalted;
his splendor is over earth and heaven.
He has raised up strength for his people,

and praise for all his loyal servants,
the children of Israel, a people who
are near to him.

Hallelujah!

Notice how beasts, kings, sea monsters,
maidens, trees, snow, fog, young men, and
shining stars all join together in praise.
The fabric of creation binds all together.

Jesus used agrarian language regularly.
He spoke of faith the size of a mustard
seed, knowing that his hearers would
understand this to be a tiny amount
of faith, like a tiny seed. He spoke
of scattering seed on rocky soil, thorny
ground, or fertile ground, knowing

that his listeners would understand something about how seeds take root and grow. Indeed, for us to understand Jesus and his teachings, we have to know something about the land and the plants and animals that live around us. Likewise, the importance Jesus places on land teaches us something of God's priorities: The creation matters.

Of course, it's not just the scriptures that shape our understanding of creation and our relationship to it. *The Book of Common Prayer* is infused with teaching about creation. Since we gather most often as a community to partake in Holy Eucharist, let's look at the eucharistic prayers.

Rite I, Prayer II, begins with a reminder about creation, "All glory be to thee, O Lord our God, for that thou didst create heaven and earth, and didst make us in thine own image" (341). Creation is so important that its invocation begins the prayer. Similarly, in Rite II, Prayer B begins, "We give thanks to you, O God, for the goodness and love which you have made known to us in creation..." (368).

Prayer C offers more robust teaching about creation. The prayer begins,

God of all power, Ruler of the Universe, you are worthy of glory and praise.

Glory to you for ever and ever.

At your command all things came to be: the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home.

By your will they were created and have their being.

From the primal elements you brought forth the human race, and blessed us with memory, reason, and skill. You made us the rulers of creation. But we turned against you, and betrayed your trust; and we turned against one another.

Have mercy, Lord, for we are sinners in your sight. (370)

Here we see the important idea that God entrusted us to rule creation, and we squandered this gift, turning against God, against creation, and against one another. Prayer D picks up this same theme: "We acclaim you, holy Lord, glorious in power. Your mighty works reveal your wisdom and love. You formed us in your own image, giving the whole world into our care, so that, in obedience to you, our Creator, we might rule and serve all your creatures. When our disobedience took us far from you, you did not abandon us to the power of death" (373).

The Book of Common Prayer offers many lovely prayers about nature and creation.

For the Right Use of God's Gifts

Almighty God, whose loving hand hath given us all that we possess: Grant us grace that we may honor thee with our substance, and, remembering the account which we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of thy bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.* (827)

For the Conservation of Natural Resources

Almighty God, in giving us dominion over things on earth, you made us fellow workers in your creation: Give us wisdom and reverence so to use the resources of nature, that no one may suffer from our abuse of them, and that generations yet to come may continue to praise you for your bounty; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.* (827)

For the Harvest of Lands and Waters

O gracious Father, who openest thine hand and fillest all things living with plenteousness: Bless the lands and waters, and multiply the harvests of the world; let thy Spirit go forth, that it

may renew the face of the earth; show thy loving-kindness, that our land may give her increase; and save us from selfish use of what thou givest, that men and women everywhere may give thee thanks; through Christ our Lord. *Amen.* (828)

If we are to live faithfully according to the vision set out in scripture and echoed in our liturgy, we must see God at work in creation; we must honor the gift of creation, and we must use this gift to the good of others.

Our culture pushes us toward two dangerous sins that are relevant here.

First, our culture prizes individualism and the idea that each of us is responsible for ourselves alone—others can solve their own problems. Taking individualism to an extreme, we can begin to believe that we are our own saviors, that we don't need anyone else, much less God. The other dangerous sin of our time is consumption. Our culture promotes a take-what-you-want notion, that we should have what we want when we want it and our horizon need extend only to our own pleasure.

When we think about creation as a gift, these great sins are challenged. Each of us is indicted for our complicity in climate change and global forces of destruction. Just as it is true that no one can live

the fullness of a Christian life apart from Christian community, it is also true that when we sin, our sins go beyond our own individual life. Choices that we make impact the climate elsewhere. Using more electricity than we need might mean that a coal-fired plant somewhere is belching dangerous gas into the atmosphere. Buying new electronics more often than we need them results in the double destruction of the earth to mine elements for computer chips and the dumping of toxic chemicals as our machines are discarded. All of this takes place out of our sight, but we are still responsible.

The commandment to love our neighbors should be sufficient to keep us from

poisoning them by our lifestyle. However, like most ethical matters, there is great complexity in our actions and their consequences.

Every Christian would do well to take stock of what we consume. Do we consume more than we need? Are the things we discard handled in a responsible way? Can we use alternative materials (for example, compostable plastics) instead of materials that will last for centuries after we die? And what about our church buildings? Can we ensure that they are heated and cooled efficiently? Can we make sure that we are not recklessly putting plastic bottles or cups into landfills, when durable

alternatives might exist? Think about how the care of creation plays out in your life and in the life of your church community.

The important consideration is to treat creation as a gift—a gift that should be enjoyed equally by all people for countless generations to come. As with all gifts, we begin with gratitude, thanking God for

creation. Then, as with all gifts, we seek to use them well. And if we cannot use a gift from creation (food, for example), then we try to find someone else who can enjoy that gift, perhaps by sharing leftovers with someone else. Care for God's creation impacts our whole lives and everything we buy, use, or discard—and is every bit as important as how we treat other people.

For Reflection

- ❖ The Bible says that God has made us rulers of creation. Yet we also recognize that creation is a gift from God that we are asked to care for—to be stewards of—so that those who come after us can enjoy as well. How do you understand the differences between ownership (dominion) and stewardship?
- ❖ Does it change the way you think about your actions if you see care of creation as a spiritual practice

instead of environmentalism, which is purely goal-oriented? How so or why not?

- ❖ Read Psalm 148. How does it change your attitude toward the world around you when you think of creation itself praising God?
- ❖ What are some specific actions you can take to be a better steward of God's creation? What are some things your church community can do?



Chapter 22

Wonderfully Restored

God the Son and Incarnation

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

—*The Book of Common Prayer*, p.

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Sometimes Christians think of Jesus as little more than a historical figure, albeit one with special powers. But to see Jesus only as one who entered into our history for a time is to glimpse only a tiny part of God the Son, Jesus Christ. This is why it's important for us to think about the theology of incarnation.

When we talk about Jesus' incarnation, we are referring to the radical idea that the eternal God took on human flesh of a particular

person at a particular moment in history. As we discussed in Chapter 13, the "carn" part of incarnation comes from the same root as *carne*, which means meat. When we talk about Jesus' incarnation, we are literally talking about the enfleshment of God. In Jesus Christ, God took on flesh, the same flesh as us.

Unlike ordinary human beings though, Jesus Christ did not begin his existence with birth but rather at the beginning of time. The Gospel of John opens with a lovely poem about the majesty and splendor of Christ. "In the beginning was the Word,

and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). John waxes eloquently about Jesus' role in creation, in bringing beautiful, radiant life into being.

He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:2-5)

Even before Jesus' love was revealed to us in Bethlehem, he

was God. But in the incarnation, God did something extraordinary. As *The Message* version of the Bible explains, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (John 1:14). God dwelled among us, as one of us.

By affirming Jesus' incarnation, the enfleshment of God, we are affirming Jesus Christ as fully divine (the Word present at the beginning) and fully human (a helpless baby born in a remote village of ancient Palestine). God voluntarily took on human frailty, knowing our weaknesses, our joys, our sorrows, and our temptations. God even knew the

sting of death. This puts to rest any idea that our God is remote, distant from us.

In the life of Jesus Christ, everything we need to know about God is revealed. As Saint Paul wrote to the Colossians, Jesus "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15). Philippians contains a lovely hymn about the power of this humility.

Let the same mind be in you that
was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of
God,

did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point
of death—
even death on a cross.
(Philippians 2:5-8)

In other words, since God loves us
so much that God is willing to share
all our sorrows and pain, so we too
should strive to love others in the

same sacrificial way. For God, it's all
about humility and self-offering, not
about power and might.

While Jesus had access to unlimited
power as God, he did not coerce
anyone to follow him. Jesus' teaching
and life were about invitation. Jesus
invited people to give up everything
to follow him. Jesus invited his
followers to love everyone, especially
those on the margins—the people
whom conventional wisdom called
unlovable. But Jesus also challenged
everyone he met to experience
an abundant, transformed life. God
loves everyone, but God also wants
people to repent—to turn from the

direction they're going—to change and to live lives shaped by the incarnation.

So what does this incarnational theology look like when it's lived out in the church? About 1,600 years ago, John Chrysostom was Archbishop of Constantinople. He was known as a brilliant preacher who did not hesitate to preach the gospel. He famously said, "If you do not find Christ in the beggar at the church door, neither will you find him in the chalice." This is a consequence of the incarnation.

You see, if we cannot see Christ,

behold Christ, in the poor and marginalized, we will not behold him in our liturgy or sacraments. One of our baptismal promises commits us to "seek and serve Christ in all persons." We do that because all of us, and our neighbors, are bearers of God's image and beneficiaries of God's graciousness in taking on our human nature.

It's not just that we see Jesus in the sacraments and this helps us to see him in the world. The reverse is true, too. When we can see Jesus in the world, we can see him in the sacraments.

Bishop Frank Weston, the late bishop of Zanzibar, put it eloquently.

If you are Christians then your Jesus is one and the same: Jesus on the Throne of his glory, Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, Jesus received into your hearts in Communion, Jesus with you mystically as you pray, and Jesus enthroned in the hearts and bodies of his brothers and sisters up and down this country. And it is folly—it is madness—to suppose that you can worship Jesus in the Sacraments and Jesus on the Throne of glory, when you are sweating him in the souls and

bodies of his children. It cannot be done. (*Concluding Address, Anglo-Catholic Congress, 1923*)

An incarnational life demands much of us. We must look for Jesus in the poor *and* in sacraments. We are called, at every turn, to see ourselves and those around us as people whose very being has been sanctified by God's enfleshment, by God taking on our human nature.

One aspect of the incarnation is that God shows up. When we offer our presence to loved ones, to strangers, to anyone who needs us, we are taking seriously our incarnational

work. Not only does God show up, but also the incarnation teaches us about where to look for God. The incarnation of God occurred in a place and time of vulnerability. Jesus was born a helpless baby, like all other babies. He was born to traveling parents under what must have been regarded as suspicious circumstances. He was born in a remote village in an occupied backwater nation in the Roman Empire. It would be hard, if not impossible, to find power or might in the story. And yet this is how God chose to enter our world, our history. It is a powerful reminder

that we should especially look for God among the vulnerable, the weary, the traveler, the unexpected. God can come near in the person who may seem to be of dubious circumstances.

Another aspect of the incarnation is that it's messy. Most of us have experiences of God that are quite tidy. Our Episcopal church services are well ordered. We starch and iron things. We read in a particular way. We often shun disorder and messiness in our worship. So it wouldn't be too hard for us to think that God was similarly ordered as well. But the incarnation shows us

that God gets real and messy. Jesus was born in a completely ordinary way. Of course, birth is a very beautiful event. But it's also messy under any circumstances, especially in a dirty stable next to sheep and cows! And we have every reason to think that Jesus was as messy and chaotic as any child growing up. If someone suggests that the church shouldn't do something because it's unseemly or messy, we might do well to recall the reality that God didn't enter the world in a neat and tidy way.

Incarnation insists that God in Jesus Christ is both fully divine and fully

human. Church teaching holds that Jesus' life was like ours in every way, except that he did not sin. We understand sin to be separation from God, and so Jesus Christ, who was God Incarnate, could not be separated from himself. And yet, Jesus Christ was fully human, too. That means, in his humanity, he experienced pain, joy, betrayal, friendship, sorrow, learning, sadness, growth, love, temptation, and even death. Of course, after his death, God raised him to new life, but prior to death, his experience of life was very much the same as ours. God did not hold back or stay away.

When Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus, they were real tears of grief. When he celebrated at a wedding or spent time with friends or talked with strangers, he was engaging with real emotions and experiences, just like us. And so our emotions and all of life are sanctified by Jesus. God blesses us in the experience of entering our world and our lives. We do not need to be ashamed when we experience pain, joy, betrayal, friendship, sorrow, sadness, growth, love, or temptation. Death no longer has dominion over us, because we

know that God's love is stronger than death. The incarnation frees us to savor this earthly life and all that it brings.

The Bible teaches us that God is loving and God is full of surprises to our conventional thinking and ways of seeing. So we should expect surprises. And above all else, we should see in the incarnation that God's love for us is so great that God is willing to dwell in our neighborhood, even among all our frailties and faults. Thanks be to God.

For Reflection

- ❖ How do you experience Christ's presence in the sacraments? How do you experience Christ's presence in the people you encounter? How are those two things related?
- ❖ Read the Nicene Creed from "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ" through "he came down from heaven" (*The Book of Common Prayer*, 358). How does this focus on Jesus' existence

before his birth expand your understanding of him and his work?

- ❖ Incarnation is messy business. The incarnate Jesus cried and bled and got dusty and tired, just like all of us. How does this challenge you to get your hands dirty in ministry?
- ❖ Our culture tends to treat the poor and marginalized as people to avoid and diminish, and yet the teaching of the church says just the opposite. How does the church's understanding shape

your life as a Christian and a
citizen?



Chapter 23

Strengthened for Your Service

God the Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts

—*The Book of Common Prayer*, p.

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Almighty and most merciful God,
grant that by the indwelling of your
Holy Spirit we may be enlightened
and strengthened for your service;
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who
lives and reigns with you, in the
unity of the Holy Spirit, one God,
now and for ever. *Amen.*

After Jesus died, his disciples felt lost. Jesus, the Word made flesh, had brought God close to them once again. The disciples, who had walked and talked and eaten and served with Jesus, had experienced God's presence in a new and powerful way. Without the person of Jesus, they were bereft and adrift. They were afraid, hiding in locked rooms (John 20:19). And they returned to "life as usual," going back to the fishing nets they had abandoned when they first followed Jesus (John 21).

Then, the amazing happened. The resurrected Jesus appeared to them. They were filled with astonishment and surprise. We can only imagine how overjoyed they must have been, believing, perhaps, that Jesus had returned to stay with them forever. But that was not, of course, the case. Jesus appeared to the disciples in resurrected form, but he had not come to stay forever. He would soon ascend to heaven, to sit at the right hand of the Father. It must have been a roller coaster of emotions for the disciples, to have Jesus, then lose him to death, receive him back, resurrected, and then see him leave them again at the ascension.

Yet Jesus made the disciples—and all of us—a promise. Jesus told his disciples that when he returned to the Father, he would not leave them comfortless (John 14:18). In fact, Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, God's presence, to be with them—and us—always. In Acts, we hear what happens when God fulfilled that promise, sending the Holy Spirit into the midst of the disciples and to the church through the ages.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and

residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what

I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning." (Acts 2:1-15)

God joined the disciples but in a surprising way. The Holy Spirit did not appear, as Jesus did, in human flesh as a baby lying in a manger or a person who walked and talked and taught. Instead, God's presence in the person of the Holy Spirit was "like the rush of a violent wind" and appeared as "divided tongues, as of fire." And rather than the presence of a person, the Holy Spirit came as a power *within* people—the disciples were "filled with the Holy Spirit" and "the Holy Spirit gave them ability." There is no question that, in the person of the

Holy Spirit, God is powerfully present in the midst of humanity but in a new and different way than God was present in the person of Jesus Christ.

This is not to say that the Holy Spirit is new to the scene. As a church, we proclaim that the Holy Spirit was present from the beginning of creation, moving as the breath of God over the waters in Genesis 1:2. The Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, proclaiming God's love and salvation before the coming of Christ. The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus at his baptism, proclaiming him the beloved Son of God. But at Pentecost, as described in Acts 2, the disciples and the

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God's love and salvation before the coming of Christ. The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus at his baptism, proclaiming him the beloved Son of God. But at Pentecost, as described in Acts 2, the disciples and the church experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in a new way, and they are empowered by the Spirit to do new and amazing things.

Episcopalians are often wary of the Holy Spirit. We mention the Holy Spirit in our prayers, but we don't spend a lot of time talking about the Holy Spirit. This might be because the Holy Spirit isn't

typically depicted as a person. We can imagine Jesus as a person and even sometimes God the Father as a person. But the Holy Spirit is most often depicted as a dove, as fire, or as wind—abstract images that are not explicitly personal. This makes the Holy Spirit harder to wrap our brains around and less accessible than the other persons of God.

Perhaps we also shy away from the Holy Spirit because we are a little bit (or a lot) afraid. The Holy Spirit is unpredictable, dangerous, and demanding. When the Holy Spirit showed up at Pentecost, it was like

a rushing wind and a mighty fire—powerful, uncontrollable things. The Holy Spirit caused people to speak and say things they normally wouldn't say (in other languages), and the Spirit allowed people to understand things they normally wouldn't be able to understand. The whole experience was so bizarre that onlookers believed the disciples were drunk! For those in the Episcopal Church, who often value order and propriety, this idea of an indecorous Holy Spirit can seem upsetting and undesirable.

But, if we keep reading in Acts, we see that the presence of the Holy Spirit, while unconventional and unusual, was also powerful and amazing. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Peter preached to those gathered, and 3,000 people asked to be baptized (Acts 2:41). (Wouldn't those be impressive numbers on a church's report!) The followers of Jesus began to act in incredible, inspiring ways:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone,

because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, people devoted themselves to prayer and fellowship, gave sacrificially to those in need, had generous hearts, and praised God. Yes, the Holy Spirit is dangerous and demanding, because the Holy Spirit inspires conversion and change, and change is always hard and scary! And yet, the results of a life lived through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit are awe-inspiring: People worship God fully, serve others sacrificially, share what they have generously, and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ abundantly.

When we look at the Holy Spirit's presence in the Bible and in the early church, we see that the Holy Spirit shows up most powerfully *in community*. The Holy Spirit appears at Pentecost when the followers of Jesus were "all together in one place" (Acts 2:1). And the Holy Spirit's action in the early church causes people to create and sustain community: "all who believed were together and had all things in common..." (Acts 2:44).

The Holy Spirit is personal, empowering each of us with

spiritual gifts, but the Spirit's presence and power are not primarily individual. Our spiritual gifts are given to us for the community and often come in relationship with the Christian community. It is when we are together, as the Body of Christ, that we most fully experience the power of the Spirit, with each one of us taking our place as a part of the whole.

In fact, scripture tell us that we can see, visibly and powerfully, when people's lives are filled with the Holy Spirit. Galatians 5:22-23

lists fruits of the Holy Spirit—visible, describable traits that you find in people in whom the Holy Spirit dwells—"...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Disciples of Jesus, who receive the Holy Spirit that God promised, should stand out from the crowd. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to live lives that show forth to the world these fruits, this love and joy and generosity.

This can sound like an impossible task—how can we possibly do

all those things?! But our faith teaches us that we do not do these things *of our own power*, but that God's Spirit, working in us, empowers us to live in these ways. The fruits of the Spirit are not some impossible standard that we strive to achieve. The fruits of the Spirit are the visible signs of a life that is lived through the power of God.

To say it another way, a life empowered by the Holy Spirit is a gift, not a goal. The disciples didn't work hard to earn the Holy Spirit—it descended upon them as a gift from God. Through the

power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were able to do things that they did not imagine possible without God's power—preaching prophetically, sharing generously, praying constantly, and serving joyfully. So too, we are told, God sends the Holy Spirit to each of us, empowering us with spiritual gifts.

You might be surprised to learn that, as a disciple of Jesus, you are *already* filled with the Holy Spirit and you have been given powerful spiritual gifts! The Bible lists some particular gifts of the spirit in Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians

12:4-11, 1 Corinthians 12:27-31, and Ephesians 4:11-12. The lists vary but include gifts of: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, generosity, leadership, cheerfulness, knowledge, faith, discernment, tongues, interpretation, servanthood, wisdom, healing, apostleship, evangelism, and shepherding.

"Tongues" is one of the gifts listed in the Bible, and it often gets a lot of attention. This is because of the description of Pentecost and because of

Pentecostal churches, which place a lot of emphasis on this particular gift. It is important to note that "tongues" is just one gift listed among many and in no way is deemed more important (or more universal) than other gifts of the Spirit.

It is impossible to go into detail about all of these gifts or to interpret and define exactly how they might be expressed. How is the gift of wisdom different from the gift of knowledge? What exactly does apostleship entail? But there are some important things to note about spiritual gifts:

❖ Everyone gets them! Spiritual gifts are not something reserved for church leaders or awarded to certain special people. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). That means that *everyone*—including you—has spiritual gifts. In fact, you might have a few spiritual gifts, because some naturally work together.

❖ There are a variety of gifts, and none are better than others.

For as in one body we have many members, and not all

the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness (Romans 12:4-8).

❖ All of the different spiritual gifts are necessary in the

building up of the kingdom, and in fact, these gifts work together to share God's love with the world. Your gift is important...and so is everyone else's! Be willing to recognize that others have gifts that you don't. That's why we need one another.

❖ Your spiritual gifts are a free gift from God. Those gifts are yours—to use or not. Gifts of the Holy Spirit are not things you have to work for and try to earn; they are attributes that you already have and have to decide to explore and use. Learning

about your spiritual gifts is similar to reading a manual for a present you've received; it's a way to figure out how the thing that you already have works! By learning about our gifts, we can cultivate and strengthen them. Sometimes just being aware that something is your gift can help you focus on offering and exercising it.

❖ The gifts of the Holy Spirit are given "for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). It is your *duty* to share the gifts that you've been given with the rest of us. You shouldn't engage in false

humility, saying that you don't have any gifts. And you can't be selfish, hoarding your gifts for yourself or your immediate family. Your gifts are meant to be shared, and by exercising your gifts for the common good, you take your place in the Body of Christ.

- ❖ No person has every spiritual gift! The number of gifts might vary—some will have a single gift, while others might have several. What is important is for us to treasure whatever gift or gifts God has sent our way.

- ❖ It is important to find ways to use our gifts and not to try to exercise gifts we may not have been given. For example, if I don't have the gift of teaching, I won't be a very good Sunday School teacher. When we look for people who carry out ministries in our churches, we should be looking for spiritual gifts, not just for willing volunteers.

Discerning Spiritual Gifts

Now that you've learned that everyone receives spiritual gifts, how do you figure out your

spiritual gifts? The Bible doesn't include a handy spiritual gifts inventory or social media quiz, leaving us instead to do the work of discernment as individuals and as a community. If you'd like a book or resource to guide your reflection, ask your priest for suggestions; she can help you find one that approaches spiritual gifts from an Episcopal perspective.

You can also do your own discernment:

1. Read the passages in the Bible that talk about spiritual gifts,

especially 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4. As you read these passages, notice whether any of the gifts jump out at you. Do you find certain gifts more intriguing or appealing? Which ones sound most like you? Which ones are most challenging for you?

2. Spend some time reflecting carefully on your life thus far. What are some of your moments of greatest spiritual fulfillment, and what were you doing in those moments? When have you felt most

fully integrated into the Body of Christ and what were you doing in those times? When have you felt most helpful to your brothers and sisters in Christ? When have you felt most disconnected from the Body of Christ?

3. Ask others—trusted friends or advisors—what they think your spiritual gifts are. Sometimes others see us more clearly than we see ourselves!
4. Try a few gifts and see what you discover. Maybe you've never had a chance to exercise leadership, or you've never

tried healing prayer. Give yourself an opportunity to explore new spiritual gifts; you might discover a spiritual gift you never knew about.

Many times, this work of discovering our spiritual gifts is related to our work of discerning vocation. When we are lucky, our spiritual gifts support us in our various vocations. Knowing our spiritual gifts can also help us live more fully into our life's vocations, building on our strengths while growing deeper in our discipleship as Christians.

God promises to be with us always. God came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ, living and breathing and loving and dying as one of us. And God continues to come into the world and into our lives as the Holy Spirit, inspiring and empowering us to do God's work in the world. God's Holy

Spirit is both an amazing gift and an incredible responsibility. Just like the earliest disciples, we too are "filled with the Holy Spirit," and "the Holy Spirit [gives us] ability" to be prophets and teachers, to be wise and cheerful, to be leaders and evangelists and much more.

For Reflection

- ❖ We are accustomed to praying to God the Father or God the Son. Do you often invoke the Holy Spirit in your prayers? Why or why not?
- ❖ What do you find most comforting about the presence and power of the Holy Spirit? What do you find most challenging?
- ❖ Some might say, "The Holy

Spirit was here," when we are pleased with an outcome or situation. How can we tell our own emotions or feelings apart from the presence of God's Spirit? When might they be the same or different?

- ❖ Do you recognize any of your spiritual gifts in today's chapter? Are there any that you wish you had?

