

When Word Fail-Metaphors for the Holy Spirit

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

Good Morning Church Family,

It has been said, “The limits of my language are the limits of my world.” The limits of my language are the limits of my world. Humankind uses language, words, sounds, gestures to communicate. Words are how we get our ideas across. We’ve developed systems to help those who have difficulty talking to participate in communication. Hard of hearing folks use sign language, and the visually impaired use braille. We long to understand and be understood.

There are few things as frustrating as trying to communicate something, but not understanding the language. Sometimes this happens when travelling abroad, desperate to ask for directions, but unable to find the right words. Sometimes this happens in high school algebra, knowing that there is an answer to the equation, but what that answer is eludes you. Or like every single time that I visit Home Depot- I end up standing dumbly in front a staff member saying, “I’m looking for a thing...that will do...uh...this, what I want to have happen is this...I don’t know what it’s called.” There’s that moment of relief for both of us when they say, “Ohhh, you’re looking for a blah-blah-blah”, so that I can stop my strange game of charades.

That's sometimes how I feel when talking about the Holy Spirit. This third person of the trinity feels more elusive than God the Father or God the Son. The son? I can point to Jesus, the one who put on human flesh, becoming like us and walking among us. That I can describe, that I can picture. Even God the Father, I imagine the one who created the world, who set things into motion, threw the stars in the sky, or perhaps a gentle king, keeping watch. The Holy Spirit?... ..a ghost... a still small voice...a feeling...a feeling of...what exactly? How do we talk about the Holy Spirit? On this Pentecost morning, the day when we remember that rushing wind, those small, holy, wild flames that descended on our ancestors in faith, what are we talking about? And how do we, some 2000 years on from that first Pentecost, think and talk about the Holy Spirit in our own lives? Especially in a time and place in our society where anything that we cannot see, cannot study, cannot quantify is treated with great suspicion.

If you've ever wondered or questioned the existence of the Holy Spirit, you're not alone. In a 2021 study performed by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, 58% of self-identified Christian Adults in North America contend that the Holy Spirit is not a real, living being but is merely a symbol of God's power, presence, or purity. In her essay, "Overcoming Holy Spirit Shyness in the life of the church", Cheryl Bridges Jones says this, "The contemporary church suffers from what James Forbes calls the Holy Spirit Shyness. Most Christians know that the Holy Spirit exists, but in their day-to-day existence and in the life and worship of the churches they display hesitation and even fear of the third person of the trinity. In his popular book, *The Forgotten God*, Francis Chan comments: "From my perspective, the Holy Spirit is

tragically neglected, and, for all practical purposes, forgotten. While no evangelical would deny His existence, I'm willing to bet there are millions of church goers across America who cannot confidently say they have experienced the Holy Spirit's presence or action in their lives over the past year. And many of them do not believe they can."

If we trace this thread back through Christian history, there are a few key reasons why we have ended up in this place of lacking belief, or perhaps even more so, lacking language for the Holy Spirit within the modern church. The first is that Protestant Christianity is decidedly Christ centred-Jesus is the star of the show., if you will. While this isn't necessarily a bad thing, it has pushed the other person of the trinity off to the side. We've lost any balance. We talk about having a relationship with Jesus, but ignore the reality that having a relationship with Jesus means being in contact, in relationship with the Holy Spirit. We fail to see that it is the Holy Spirit who brings us into relationship with Jesus. Another big reason is that the Holy Spirit is often associated with enthusiastic forms of religion, emotive worship and even disregard for scripture. We as Anabaptist hold scripture, specifically the words of Jesus in such high regard, that it created further distance for an active, robust understanding. And culturally, Mennonites have a concern about being "too showy". And then, finally, there was the Enlightenment. High elevated "rational, logical thoughts" over emotional or experiential knowledge. Bridges Johns says it really well in that same essay, "Even those who have roots among the dissenters to the Enlightenment find refuge within its safe walls of logic. As a result, we fear anything that appears irrational or emotive. Failing to understand the difference between the transrational and the irrational, modern Christians limit the work of the Holy

Spirit to that which can be understood and rationally explained. In doing so, we have further marginalised the work of the Holy Spirit from the life of the churches.” Those reasons, in a nutshell, are how we ended up here.

The hope for my sermon this morning, is not to make a passionate defence for the existence of the Holy Spirit, rather my hope it to give us some language, some handles, if you will to talk about the Holy Spirit and what the Holy Spirit does in our lives as individuals and as a collective, and how that shapes us in Christian discipleship.

First, I think this grappling together for Language about the Holy Spirit means that we're in good company. When Jesus talks with his disciples about the coming of the Holy Spirit in John 15:26, it says, ““When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.” That word there is Advocate, a translation of the Greek word “Paraclete”. Paraclete (Greek: παράκλητος, romanized: Paráklētos) is a Christian biblical term occurring five times in the Johannine texts of the New Testament. In Christian theology, the word commonly refers to the Holy Spirit and is translated as 'advocate', 'counsellor or 'helper'. Advocate. Counsellor or Helper. For me, those words sort of dance around what the Holy Spirit does, but it's not quite precise. And maybe that's the point, the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit's works are hard to pin down, hard to define, and maybe it is, in the best sense, a deeply mysterious thing.

But what these words from Jesus do tell us is that He is the one who is sending the Holy Spirit to us, from the Father. That this Spirit is a gift, a gift to us, Jesus followers. I think that's a very non-intimidating, non-threatening way to give some language to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a gift. And that gift serves a dual purpose in our lifelong transformation as disciples of Jesus.

First, the Spirit is a gift given for our life. Just as parents love to give good gifts that will be good for their children, Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit because it is good for us. The Spirit draws us into relationship with Jesus, relationship with others, and a sense of peace and direction in our own lives.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus promises abundant life, rich, meaning, connected life with God to those who would choose to follow him. One of my favourite gospel encounters is when Jesus meets the Samaritan Woman at the well. Culturally, Jesus should not be speaking to this woman, yet he asks her to draw him some water from the well for him to drink. She does and as they talk, Jesus tells her about the water that a life spent following Jesus can offer. “The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.[a])

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” “Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it

himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?” Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

Jesus offered the gift of the living water to this woman, and to all of us. Jesus offers the gift of the Holy Spirit to all of us. The Holy Spirit, in some ways, is like a well. The place of connection to the source of all life, Jesus. A gift of connection and life.

An aside here, this is not to say that someone who is connected to the Holy Spirit is just this emotive, bubble of joy spreading sunshine and rainbows everywhere they go. Some of the times that I felt and experienced my closest connection with God were really, really hard times in my life. When Taylor and I were wrestling with this question of whether or not to pack up everything, including our 16 month old daughter, to move to Saskatchewan to start a job in a town I had never seen before, I remember saying to Taylor, “I will probably cry every day for the next six months, but I think this the right thing to do. I have peace about this.” And we did move. And I felt deeply that this was where God was leading us. And I cried probably everyday for at least 2 months, because it was hard. And lots of really, really good things, gifts from God, have grown from that move, and I’m thankful for where the Spirit led us.

So that’s the first thing that the gift of the Holy Spirit does for us—a life giving connection between God and ourselves. But that’s just the first part, the Holy Spirit, dwelling within us, active in our lives, gives US to the life of the body. The Holy Spirit is GIVEN to the Body THROUGH us. We are equipped for service. That’s what the text that Ed read us

for this morning says, “Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves[d] or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” It is the Holy Spirit who allows us to say Jesus is Our Lord, and the Holy Spirit who gives us what we need to full live out that declaration of Lordship through service to our siblings in faith.

I’ll close this morning with a story: I’ve often joked that my memoir will be titled *Becoming Mennonite: The Emily Summach Story*. When people ask me how I found the Mennonite church, I used to tell them the story of a providential google search and a welcoming little congregation in rural Saskatchewan. But my answer to the question of how I found the Mennonite church has changed. I found it because of the Holy Spirit. I struggled with the idea of the Holy Ghost. It felt a little “woo-woo”; this notion of an

ephemeral being who was active in my life and in the world. I'd seen too many terrible decisions made by people who claimed to be acting on the leading of the Holy Spirit. One of my favourite books to read with the kids is *The Runaway Bunny*, by Margaret Wise Brown. The allegorical story tells about a little bunny, who in a fit of anger, tells his mother that he is going to run away from home. The little bunny imagines all the things that he will become into in order to escape his mother's presence. A mountain climber. A fish. For every transformation the bunny imagines, his mother is still there. "If you become a bird and fly away from me, I will become the tree that you come home to," says his mother. "If you become a sailboat and sail away from me, I will become the wind, and I will blow you where I want you to go." For me, The Holy Spirit is like Mother Bunny. Present and watchful, deeply invested in our lives, steering us into the spaces and places where God's love will find us. The Holy Spirit opens my eyes to see that I live in a God soaked world. And lest I think that I am in control of my own destiny, the nudgings (sometimes shovings) of the Spirit reminds me otherwise. How did I find the Mennonite Church? Because the Holy Spirit convicted us to seek a local body, rather than commuting. Because this particular church followed the Spirit's leading in their context and had female leadership. Because the Holy Spirit spoke to us through the love and hospitality of a small group of people. Because we found a community, through the Spirit, around a dining room table crowded with small children, piled with plates of spaghetti. We found the Mennonites because the Holy Spirit, gently, lovingly, brought us here. And I found all of you, because of the Holy Spirit's leading, and I am so, so grateful.

Friends, As we turn towards Pentecost, may we notice the direction of the Holy Spirit in our stories, and give thanks to God for that gift. Amen.