

The Friendliest Ghost You Know

May 23, 2010

(The Day of Pentecost – Year C)

John 14: 8-17, 25-27

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Please be seated

When I was a small boy, I used to love to watch cartoons.
Tom & Jerry and Popeye and the Flintstones were all staples on our
television screen.
However, there was one cartoon that always did seem to fascinate me.
The cartoon was called “Casper, The Friendly Ghost.”

In this cartoon, Casper is a white ghost, who also resembles a pudgy
little boy.
All of the other ghosts in town go around scaring people.
But Casper is different.
Casper decides that instead of scaring people, like most ghosts, he wants
to go around town and make friends.
Sadly, however, when Casper attempts to make friends, they discover
that he is a ghost and they run off scared, many times with their
teeth clattering behind them.
Although I don't remember very much about the story lines from the
Casper cartoons, I do remember the theme song from the show.

*Casper, the friendly ghost.
The friendliest ghost you know.
Though grownups might
Look at him with fright
The children all love him so.*

You might say that Casper is a ghost in need of an image makeover -
because most people just assume that a ghost is creepy and scary.

Yet Casper, the friendly ghost, is loving and kind.

When I was growing up in the Episcopal Church, we did not refer to the Holy Trinity as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Instead, in the old days, we referred to the Holy Trinity as the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

As a matter of fact, in the opening hymn that we sang on this festival morning of Pentecost, we sing:

Hail thee, festival day!

Day when the Holy *Ghost* shone in the world with God's grace.

Yet whenever I think of the Holy Ghost, I must say that that image of Casper, the friendly ghost, creeps up from the realms of my childhood memories.

And I see that, just as Casper needed an image makeover, The Holy Spirit needs an image makeover, as well.

In this last week, I prepared for this festival day of Pentecost, the day when we celebrate that the Holy Spirit was poured out on all people.

And as I prepared for Pentecost, I asked many different people this question:

What do you think about the Holy Spirit?

By and large, the initial reaction I got from most people was the same as if they had seen a ghost.

Most people's first reaction was that the Holy Spirit is spooky and creepy and frightening.

And once again I realized:

The Holy Spirit is in need of an image makeover.

In the Gospel of John that we read this morning, Philip makes this request of Jesus:

“Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied.”

Jesus then replies by saying that if we have seen Jesus, then we have seen the Father.

Now the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit are all equal.
And the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit all reflect the nature of the one true God, a loving God revealed in three persons.

Therefore, given the equality of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, I believe that we can substitute Philip's request to see the Father with a request to see the Holy Spirit.

With this substitution, Philip requests:

“Lord, show us the *Holy Spirit* and we will be satisfied.”

And then Jesus would reply by saying –

If we have seen Jesus, then we have seen the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, the Holy Spirit is not some weird and freaky ghost who scares the living daylights out of us.

The Holy Spirit has the same nature and qualities as Jesus.

Like Jesus, the Holy Spirit is loving and kind and joyful and fills us with justice and peace.

In some respects, I think that the story that we heard this morning from the Book of Acts is not helpful in improving the image of the Holy Spirit as some scary and weird ghost.

In the Book of Acts, we heard that the Holy Spirit is poured out upon all people in Jerusalem, with a mighty wind and with tongues of fire.

Then, the people begin speaking in different languages.

Parthians, Medes, Elamites – all hear about God's deeds of power in their own languages.

Immediately in our minds, we could have an image of the Holy Spirit as a force that makes everyone speak in tongues and roll around on the floor and handle snakes and raise our hands in the air and shout: Amen, Hallelujah!

And we wonder why the Holy Spirit has an image problem.

And while some people do encounter the Holy Spirit in amazing ways, for most of us the Holy Spirit is simply the Spirit of Jesus - who is still alive on this earth today.

The Holy Spirit is the spirit of love and joy and peace and kindness and gentleness.¹

And I know, without a doubt, that the Holy Spirit is alive and active in your lives - in love and joy and peace.

I know that the Holy Spirit is alive and active when I see you spend hours of your free time volunteering in our schools and libraries and hospitals.

I know that the Holy Spirit is alive and active when I hear that you spend each and every morning in silent prayer at your breakfast room table, praying using Forward Day by Day.

I know that the Holy Spirit is alive and active when I see you reach out to a newcomer or a guest at this church with the same hospitality of Jesus.

I know that the Holy Spirit is alive and active when we worship in this church each Sunday - and the bread, the wine, the words, the music all wash over me in a peace, a peace that passes all understanding.

I know that the Holy Spirit is alive and active, not because you speak in tongues or perform fantastic miracles.

I know that the Holy Spirit is alive and active – because I see Jesus in you.

However, my brothers and sisters, I want us to talk about the Holy Spirit more.

I want us to name and acknowledge the Spirit's power in our lives.

I want us to proclaim, boldly, that we love and serve and pray in ways that we could never imagine on our own – because of the Holy Spirit.

I want us to see the Holy Spirit, not as some scary and weird ghost, but as our powerful companion in every day life.

The theme song to that old cartoon used to go:

*Casper, the friendly ghost,
The friendliest ghost you know.*

¹ See the fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5:22-23

Yet Casper is not the only spirit who wants to love and be a friend.
Casper is *not* the friendliest ghost you know.
The Holy Ghost, the Holy Spirit, is the friendliest ghost you know.

AMEN.

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