

*Acts 20:17-38 (NRSV)*

<sup>17</sup>From Miletus he sent a message to Ephesus, asking the elders of the church to meet him. <sup>18</sup>When they came to him, he said to them:

“You yourselves know how I lived among you the entire time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, <sup>19</sup>servicing the Lord with all humility and with tears, enduring the trials that came to me through the plots of the Jews. <sup>20</sup>I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house, <sup>21</sup>as I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus. <sup>22</sup>And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, <sup>23</sup>except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me. <sup>24</sup>But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God’s grace.

<sup>25</sup>“And now I know that none of you, among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom, will ever see my face again. <sup>26</sup>Therefore I declare to you this day that I am not responsible for the blood of any of you, <sup>27</sup>for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. <sup>28</sup>Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. <sup>29</sup>I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. <sup>30</sup>Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them. <sup>31</sup>Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears. <sup>32</sup>And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified. <sup>33</sup>I coveted no one’s silver or gold or clothing. <sup>34</sup>You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. <sup>35</sup>In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

<sup>36</sup>When he had finished speaking, he knelt down with them all and prayed. <sup>37</sup>There was much weeping among them all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, <sup>38</sup>grieving especially because of what he had said, that they would not see him again. Then they brought him to the ship.

*As we finish our quick trip through the stories of the Holy Spirit at work in the early church, we can ask ourselves this question: Do we truly and thankfully embrace and rely on the Holy Spirit as we live with God?*

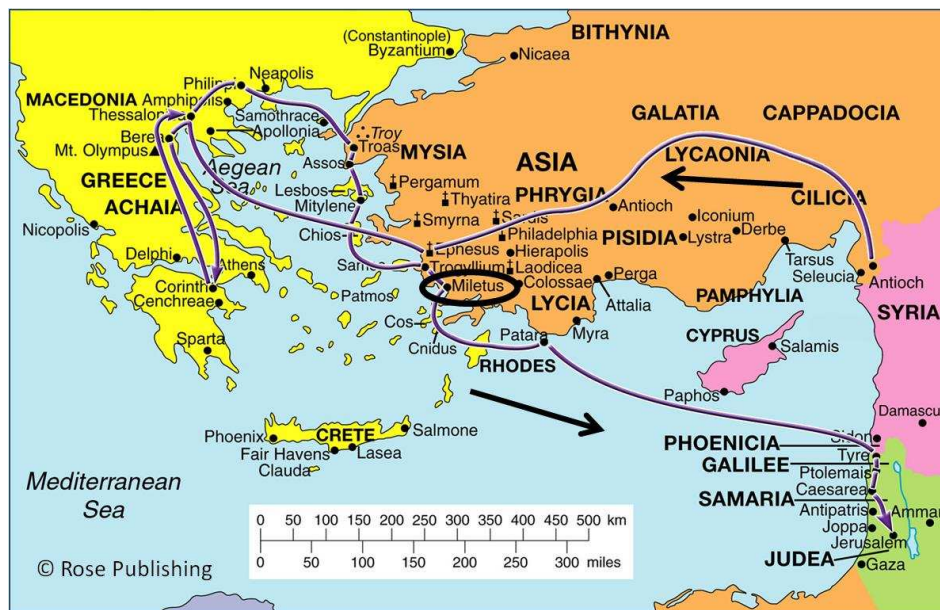
Each week, we rise together and recite together the Apostles’ Creed. Ask yourself, what phrase immediately follows “I believe in the Holy Spirit”? . . . The next phrase in the creed generates more questions than any other: “. . . the holy catholic Church.” The word “catholic” is an old word that means “comprehensive” or “universal,” especially as it relates to the Christian Church. Our affirmation is simply that all those who have faith in Jesus Christ comprise a group that transcends all divisions of race, nationality, gender, age, and so on. We call this group the body of Christ or the Church (*ekklesia* in the Greek) or the universal/catholic Church. It is holy in that it has been formed by God and set apart to be his people, through whom God works to bring the Good News to all.

It is vitally important to grasp that the “holy, universal Church” is not simply a gathering of like-minded people who share common interests or a common goal. There are countless clubs and organizations that could be described in that way. The Church, in contrast, is a fellowship (*koinonia* in the Greek) created by God through Christ. God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, sustains, nurtures, and grows this fellowship. Indeed, Paul described the Church as the temple of God, the place where God dwells with his people as he had once dwelt in the temple in Jerusalem (e.g. 1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

Paul’s trinitarian benediction of 2 Corinthians 13:14 sums it up this way: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the *koinonia* (fellowship/communion) of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.” As Gordon Fee writes, “The community of God’s people owes their life together as a body to their common, lavish experience of the Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> Why is there a St. Andrew? Because of the work of the Spirit.

### *Paul’s third missionary journey*

The book of Acts is the story of the Holy Spirit working through the apostles and many others to create and grow the Church in the first decades after Jesus’ crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Last week, we learned how the Spirit led Paul westward into Macedonia and Greece on his second missionary journey. After spending “some time” in Jerusalem at the end of that journey, Paul headed out again on a third journey. The course of this journey is shown in the map below.



Paul’s route took him to Ephesus, then to Macedonia, and southward through Greece (Achaia). Paul was about to sail back home when he learned of a conspiracy against him. He decided to head back north to Macedonia, across to Troas, and south to Miletus. Paul had run into some trouble in Ephesus<sup>2</sup> earlier on this journey, so he bypassed Ephesus for Miletus and asked the Christian leaders in Ephesus (there can’t have been many) to come to him for a meeting.

Paul’s talk with the Ephesian leaders (“elders” in the NRSV) is recounted for us in Acts 20:17-38, today’s Scripture passage. It is a frank and moving speech. Though made to some elders from the area of Ephesus, Paul’s speech is really to all whom he had spent many years teaching and leading. We can’t miss the parallels with Jesus’ last talks with

<sup>1</sup>from Fee’s, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*. Hendrickson Publishers. 1995. This book is an excellent lay-oriented introduction to Paul’s teachings on the Holy Spirit.

<sup>2</sup>Ok . . . that is an understatement. He was pretty much run out of town after upsetting local merchants. For the full story see Acts 19:23-41.

his disciples. Like Jesus, Paul knows that the end has come, that “imprisonment and persecutions are waiting” for him (v. 24). How does he know that his return to Jerusalem will be the beginning of the end? Because the Holy Spirit has told him so (v.23)! The same Spirit who has guided, comforted, and strengthened Paul for more than twenty years, to whom he has been “captive” (v. 22) all this time, now directs him to Jerusalem, toward trouble, not away from it. Paul has seen much trouble before in his work for “the church of God, that he obtained with the blood of his own son” (v. 28). Given the spilling of Jesus’ blood, Paul is not surprised that his own would one day be spilt.

And just as Jesus promises his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion that the Father would send the Holy Spirit to be with them, to be their Comforter and Advocate, so Paul reassures the leaders, telling them that “the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God . . .” (v. 28).

They are not leaders chosen by men and women, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. These leaders will be God’s shepherds, looking over God’s flock.



The Dove

The image above is that of the dove in St. Andrew’s rose window. All four Gospel writers tell us that at Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River, God’s Spirit descended like a dove upon Jesus. Luke put it this way, “and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove” (Luke 3:22).

Though doves appear in the Old Testament, never before in Jewish traditions had a dove been used to represent God’s Spirit. This was new!

The descent of God’s Spirit upon Jesus, accompanied by the voice from heaven, marks out Jesus as God’s “beloved Son” and prepares us for the uniqueness of Jesus and his mission. Later, returning to his hometown, Jesus would rise in the synagogue to read from Isaiah 61: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me.”

This symbol of the Holy Spirit is closely tied to another Rose Window symbol: the fleur-de-lis, a traditional symbol of the Trinity. Though our affirmation that God is triune may seem remote and incomprehensible, it is absolutely fundamental to our faith and underlies all that we proclaim to the world. We proclaim that there is one God who exists as a community of three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three persons are indivisible yet distinct; they comprise a unity of three; they are equal and eternal. The Holy Spirit, represented in the window by the dove, is truly and completely God, every bit as much as Jesus and every bit as much as the Father.

See the next page for more on the Trinity.

### *The With-God Life*

Living with God does not come naturally to us. The “with-God” life is neither obvious nor easy. Indeed, much of our modern and post-modern culture strives for the “without-God” life, thinking that *we* can meet our deepest desires and needs ourselves.

But we cannot. As the writer of Ecclesiastes put it long ago, a life without God is nothing but vapor, with no lasting meaning or purpose.

Left to ourselves, such vapor would be all we have. But we are not in this alone. God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, empowers and comforts and encourages all those who have placed their faith in Christ. It is God who has made us, not we ourselves. And it is God who calls us to him and offers us the fulfillment we so desperately seek.

Our long-term neglect of the Holy Spirit, thinking of him, when we even do so, as something akin to electricity or an energy drink has impoverished us. We say we want to be “spiritual” or pursue “spiritual growth,” but we imagine that we can do so if we just find the right program or the right guru – rather than acknowledging that it is the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, whom we must embrace and allow to work with us and through us as we strive to be the people God has re-created us to be. There is no other way. This is God’s Way.

## God – personal and triune: Father, Son, & Holy Spirit

In a series on the Holy Spirit, discussion of our belief in a triune God is inescapable. Yet, without question, for many Christians the whole notion of the Trinity is one of the most perplexing and seemingly irrelevant Christian doctrines. Though we might affirm a statement something like this, “We believe in one God, who has always known himself as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,<sup>1</sup>” it can be pretty hard us to see that this makes much sense or that it makes much difference in our lives as Christians. Yet, our belief in a personal, triune God is foundational to all that makes Christianity unique among the world’s major religions. The more one comes to understand the whole story of God’s work to rescue his creation, the more one comes to understand that our belief in the Trinity underlies all things Christian.

Ask yourself this question: What do we know about God that we wouldn’t know without Jesus? Jesus said and did things that only God could say and do! Who was Jesus? Could he possibly be God himself? But how could this be if there is only one God? In the writings of the New Testament, the first Christians came to understand that God had revealed, through Jesus, his deeper nature. Namely, that while there is unity in God – yes, there is one God – there is also community, fellowship, and love in God’s very being.

*God is Love . . . God is community . . . God is relational*

In a letter, John wrote that, “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” (1John 4:16b) What do you think John meant by saying – “God is love”? Did he mean that God loves more than anyone? that God loves without ceasing? or perhaps that God loves truly? All this is accurate, but it isn’t saying that God is love. After all, it seems almost nonsensical. Love must have an object. We love something or we love someone. How could any single person, in isolation, be love? However, when we proclaim that God is unity in three persons, then the statement that God is love makes perfect sense. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have always been, are now, and always will be in loving relationship with one another. God is love because God is inherently relational. The loving relationships among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit form the basis of God’s very essence. The three persons of the Godhead live in eternal community, in a loving community of three persons.

What does this mean for us? The opening chapters of Genesis tell us that humans are made in God’s image. At a minimum, this means that we too are inherently relational; that we are made to live in loving relationship with one another. Indeed, living our lives in isolation diminishes the image of God within us. We are called to love God and neighbor, for God *is* love.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Where should we begin in our embracing of the Holy Spirit as God’s empowering presence of our lives? Is it with new programs and ministries? Is it a matter of personal reflection? Is it a matter of simple determination? Simply put, where do we begin?
2. What are some of the key barriers to our living genuinely Spirit-filled lives? Is it our need to be in control? Our confidence that we know best? Is it simply habits of self-reliant *doing* that we’ve developed over our lives? Is it a lack of knowledge and understanding?
3. In his book, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, Daniel Migliore reminds us that the history of God’s steadfast love for the world stands at the center of the biblical witness. Migliore offers three affirmations about the doctrine of the Trinity: (1) “to confess that God is triune is to affirm that the eternal life of God is personal life in relationship,” (2) “to confess that God is triune is to affirm that God exists in community,” and (3) “to confess that God is triune is to affirm that the life of God is essentially self-giving love.” Consider each of the three tightly-packed statements. What does Migliore mean? How would you restate these in your own words? What ought to be our response to this trinitarian understanding of God? Finally, do you think many Christians have a difficult understanding that our belief in the inherent relationality of God, i.e., trinitarian, underlies all things Christian.

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. In this week's readings we will pick up where we left off last week and finish the book of Acts.

<p><b>Monday, Acts 18:18-21:16</b> Paul's third missionary journey and his return to Jerusalem.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Acts 21:17 – 23:11</b> Paul is arrested and tried in the temple and before the Roman authorities.</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Acts 23:12 – 24:27</b> The Romans rescue Paul from an assassination plot and he appears before Felix, the governor.</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Acts 25-26</b> Paul appeals to the Emperor and defends himself before Agrippa.</p>
<p><b>Friday, Acts 27 – 28:16</b> Paul is sent to Rome for trial and is shipwrecked on Malta enroute.</p>	<p><b>Saturday, Acts 28:17-31</b> Paul in Rome. What do you think happens from here? Is he tried? Is he tried and released? Is he tried and executed? Biblical scholars do not agree!</p>

