

## **WHO'S AFRAID OF THE HOLY GHOST? A SERMON ON JOHN 14:15-31**

**by Rev. Russell B. Smith**

---

If you've been awake at all for the past year or two, you've heard the name Harry Potter. Harry Potter is the hero of a series of popular children's books that have magically taken over your local bookstore. Harry is a young boy who discovers that he has immense magical power and subsequently learns that there are wizards and monsters who are engaged in an epic struggle of good versus evil. The books have kicked up quite a controversy in some Christian circles because of the belief that they encourage children to explore witchcraft and the occult. Beyond that controversy, however, is the undeniable fact that the books are immensely popular. They strike a very deep chord, not just in children, but in adults as well.

One reason is that Harry is an orphan. His parents died while he was an infant and his aunt and uncle took him in. Harry is not treated well by his aunt and uncle, though. He lives in a closet under the staircase, he has to cook breakfast, and his only clothes are worn out hand-me-downs. He feels alone, trapped, and powerless. From the midst of this darkness, he discovers he has power and leaves for a boarding school filled with children like him. He is taken from a place where he is trapped and alone to a place where he has freedom and friends. But at the end of every book, the school year ends and he has to return home to his aunt, his uncle, and his old powerless life.

Harry appeals to readers because he gives hope for an escape from loneliness and isolation and a feeling of not belonging. Ultimately, it's not a new story — what little girl didn't want to be Cinderella, going from cleaning houses to the prince's ball? What little boy didn't want to be young Arthur going from serving to ruling after pulling a sword from a stone? The theme isn't new. There is in many of us, not just in teenagers, the longing for a place where we're significant and make a difference — the longing for a place where we're loved and cared for.

But Harry's longings go deeper than adolescent fantasy. He longs for a whole family again. One of the magical objects that Harry discovers at school is the Mirror of Erised, a mirror that shows the viewer what he most desires. Whenever Harry sees the mirror, he sees his mother and father there with him. Even at the school, where friends surround him and he has a place, Harry has a longing for a deeper love connection. He still struggles with loneliness. Harry is a hero for all who struggle with loneliness and their place in this world.

Jesus knew that his disciples would experience a more profound loneliness. Here we are in the midst of the Farewell Discourse — the last things Jesus said to his disciples before his arrest and trial. We saw last time that Jesus told his disciples that He is the way to the Father, but He is going away. They've been in the presence of the one who satisfies perfectly for three years — and now he's going away. Can you imagine the profound sense of loss and abandonment that they will experience after the crucifixion? Can you imagine the joy of reunion after the resurrection and the greater puzzlement when Jesus leaves again?

But Jesus prepares his disciples for that time. Looking at our text for this lesson, God's Word says:

"If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever — the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him."

Then Judas (not Judas Iscariot) said, "But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?"

Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.

"All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

"You heard me say, 'I am going away and I am coming back to you.' If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe. I will not

speak with you much longer, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold on me, but the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.

"Come now; let us leave."

Look at verse 15, which begins, "If you love me, you will obey what I command." The word *world*, in John's gospel, often does not refer to the trees and the ground and physical things. *World* refers to everything that is in rebellion against God. It is everything that shakes its fist heavenward and says, "I refuse to obey!" How can such a person enter into relationship with the living God when he won't even acknowledge the reality of God's claim on his life? But the one who does yearn for relationship with God, who sincerely strives for obedience, will receive the Holy Spirit — forever.

Notice that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of *truth*. Later in verse 26, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will "...teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you." When he says *all things*, he means *all things* concerning the story of God's love for his people, manifested in the death, resurrection, and ascension. An essential component to this is realizing that the Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth that inspired Scripture — 2 Timothy 3:16 — "All scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the Man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." The Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth. We can't miss that, but the point I want to focus on is that the Holy Spirit lives in us.

When you give your life to Christ, the Holy Spirit comes to live inside of you forever. I Corinthians 6:19-20 says, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price; therefore honor God with your body." God lives in you all the time — not just on Sunday morning, but all the time. You are not alone. So in that quiet hour in the middle of the night when you can't fall asleep because of your worries, you are not alone — the Holy Spirit is there with you. When your heart is torn apart because a person you loved so much severed the relationship, you are not alone — the Holy Spirit is there with you. When the bills pile up, but the income doesn't, when you go for days without a human touch, when your body doesn't do what it used to do, when the accumulated disappointments of life threaten to bury you — you are not alone, the Holy Spirit is there with you. You are not an orphan. You are a child of God and an heir to the kingdom and the Holy Spirit is there with you.

You may not always feel his presence, but he's there. Everything we do here — the worship, the witness, the study, the sharing, the serving — all of it helps you become more sensitive to the presence of the Holy Spirit within, but

make no mistake, if you are a disciple of Christ, then the Holy Spirit is within you, even if you can't feel his presence.

Harry Potter's isolation and loneliness ease as he finds his true place in the world. Jesus told us that his Father has many rooms, and he goes to prepare a place for us. We have a place already — a place as heirs to God's kingdom. The Holy Spirit is our deposit, our reminder, our foretaste of that place where we fit in. Jesus is the way, and the Holy Spirit is our companion along that way. Don't be afraid of the Holy Ghost — because of him, you are not alone. Amen.