

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"Living by the Spirit"

Scripture: Galatians 5-1, 13-26 and Luke 11:11-13

Hymns: Come, O Spirit, with your sound 276, I've got peace like a river, How deep
the father's love, O Jesus, I have promised 569

Pentecost & Holy Communion

June 4, 2017

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*"When the Feast of Pentecost came,
they were all together in one place.*

*Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind...
no one could tell where it came from.
It filled the whole building.*

*Then, like a wildfire,
the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks,
and they started speaking in... different languages
as the Spirit prompted them."*

PAUSE

On the day of Pentecost,
the gift that Jesus' disciples had been waiting for
the gift that the Jesus' disciples had been praying for,
arrives in great power.

The Holy Spirit blows through their ranks
And they start speaking in others languages.
And the city around them stops and listens.

Through this Spirit they share in Jesus' life
Through this Spirit they continue Jesus' ministry.
And signs and wonders mark their way:
Lame men leap, prison doors swing open,
Uneducated men preach eloquently,
And people disappear into thin air.

With the arrival of the Spirit,
The fledgling church is given new power.
And God's mission among them races ahead.

Now this makes for interesting history.
The book of Acts is a page-turner.

But unless you're a cessationist
Believing these signs and wonders have ceased
with end of the apostolic age,
These stories will raise hard questions about the present:

Why aren't our worship services, our bible studies, our prayer meetings,
Marked by such signs and wonders?

Has the Spirit left us?
Has the Spirit gone away?

For most of us
Our knowledge and experience
Of the Holy Spirit is pretty limited. ⁱⁱ

When we think of the Holy Spirit
We tend to think of those signs and wonders
Found in the Acts of the Apostles.

But this is not the sum total
Of all the Spirit's activities.
Sometimes the Spirit works in much subtler ways.

PAUSE

Today we continue our way through Paul's letter to the Galatians.

Paul, you will remember,
is arguing that there is no need
for Gentile converts to adopt Jewish religious practices.

He tells us that the law has no power to save us,
That it was only a babysitter,
to protect us till the arrival of Christ.

Now that Christ has come,
We are freed from the law's demands
And are recipients of God's promises.

We live by the Spirit, not by the law.

Of course some wonder if this new freedom
is a license to do just anything.

Paul clearly denies this, arguing that our freedom is for a purpose:
To embrace a full relationship with God
And to love our neighbors as ourselves.ⁱⁱⁱ

We heard that this morning:
"do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence,
but through love become slaves to one another."

So how is it that we are to love one another?
To become slaves to one another?

Well Paul provides us with a description,
Character qualities that will demonstrate this spirit-filled care:
"love, joy, peace, patience,
kindness, generosity, faithfulness,
gentleness, and self-control."^{iv}

These are the 'fruit' of the Spirit.
Ways that the Spirit is evident in Christ's church.

PAUSE

I don't know about you, but I think it is helpful
that Paul describes these qualities, these characteristics, as fruit.

Most of us have some experience with gardening
Or orchards.

Using this image gives us an entry-point
To explore the Spirit's work in our lives.

Just think about those gardens, those orchards.
There is something about fruit that is purely gratuitous,
Simply a gift from God.

In Vancouver we had blackberry bushes
That grew outside the church Manse.

Those vines were always searching
for a place to take root and find sunshine.
You had to keep on top of them
or they would start encroaching on your yard.

And bringing forth fruit was something the vines did
Without any of my effort.
All I needed to do was to get out and pick them
Before the neighbors did!

Just like those berries,
the 'fruit of the Spirit' is something
the Spirit produces within us.

They are "not things which, if we try hard enough,
we could simply do without help...
when the spirit is at work they [just start to appear]..."^v

Just consider today's passage,
That command to become slaves to one another.
We do it through love, in Gk, '**THE** love',
That is the love of Jesus Christ.^{vi}

There is something about those fruit
That is simply a 'gift' of God's goodness.
The Spirit brings these qualities to life.

At the same time,
 And once again I'm drawing on our experience
 with orchards and gardens,
 There is human involvement in this fruitfulness.

The other day I was visiting
 A couple from our congregation,
 Who have a dozen fruit trees in their backyard.

Yes those fruit trees will produce on their own.
 But they also demand attention.

If you don't want worms you need to spray them.
 If you want better productivity,
 If you want the trees to stay healthy,
 extensive pruning is required.

All to say that the development of character qualities
 Such as joy or generosity involves our active engagement.

"We have to set our minds and intentions to do them;
 it isn't a matter of just relaxing and doing what comes naturally."^{vii}

This is why Paul urges us to "live by the Spirit"
 And to be "guided by the Spirit".
 This is why we are described
 As people who have "crucified the flesh."^{viii}

The appearance of the fruit of the Spirit is a gift of God,
 A gift that requires our cultivation.
 And fruitfulness takes time, it takes time.

Most of us know that growing plants is a process.

At one time or another most school-kids
 Will have the joyful experience
 Of planting seeds and watching them grow.

Through observation,
 They will note that there are distinct stages.

The seed needs take root,
 Then break through the soil and sprout.
 Leaves will then grow and mature
 And then at some point
 The plant will flower.

For a simple bean plant it will take 6-8 weeks
 To see flowers after germination.
 And these flowers are just the beginning of the fruit.

All of Paul's talk about 'living' by the Spirit,
 Or being 'guided' by the Spirit
 is similarly suggestive of a journey or a process.

Unlike signs and wonders,
 The Spirit's 'fruit' aren't instantaneous.
 They are the products of a divine/human interaction
 That works its way out, in our lives over time.

So back to my original question.
 Has the Spirit left us?
 Has the Spirit left the building?
 Well ask yourself this question.
 Have you seen the fruit of the Spirit—
 love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,
 generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—
 in the life of the Christian community?

I have.

I will be honest with you.
 I've witnessed diseased and barren branches.

But I've also seen fruit.
 And lots of it.

Some just developing.
 Some bountiful and ripe.

I think of one person in my last congregation.
 who was a successful businessman.
 But unlike many of the rich who are rich
 Because they tightly guard their resources,
 This man was always looking for opportunities
 To give his money away.

Because he knew I was on the Camp Committee,
 He'd regularly ask me
 about the current needs of the camp.

He wouldn't send them his castoffs
 But would always purchase something new.

I've seen the Spirit's fruit in the church
 And lots of it.

Over the years I've witnessed many examples of faithfulness.
 In particular, as it relates to caring for ailing and aging spouses.
 One man I knew did all he could to keep wife with him.
 Even when others said it would be easier
 To put her in a home.

But he wasn't cutting his loses
 Even when she barely knew him.
 When she finally had to be institutionalized,
 When her care was beyond his abilities,
 He was there visiting her,
 each and every day.

I've seen the Spirit's fruit.
 And I've also heard many impressive stories.

One commentator spoke
 About a situation where
 "a member of [her] congregation
 carelessly hurt the feelings of another.

[She couldn't] recall the details,
 but remember[s] witnessing the planting of seeds of a rift.

The next Sunday [she saw] the one who had given offense
 waiting anxiously on the front steps of the church,
 his choir robe billowing in the morning breeze.

[She] noticed and wondered.

[And] When the one offended showed up,
 he held out his arms to her with words of apology.

She forgave him with a brief, warm hug.
 They remain friends to this day."^{ix}

Now in each of these stories there was no ecstatic speech.
 No miraculous healings, no prison doors
 Swinging on their hinges.

And yet in these acts
 Of generosity, faithfulness, love and kindness,
 It's hard to deny that the Spirit is at work.

Moving in subtle,
 Yet powerful ways.

"In the Gospel of John, the risen Jesus breathes on the disciples
 and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

[It's just a breath]

[But] Where there is breath, there is life,
 and the breath that enlivens Christ in the resurrection
 is his gift to those he loves.

His risen life becomes their life."^x
 Becomes our life.

May we embrace that life.
 May we live in the Spirit.
 And may God's presence be known among us today.

Amen.

ⁱ Acts 2:1-4 MSG

ⁱⁱ St. Gregory of Nazianzus said that “The Old Testament proclaimed the Father clearly, but the Son more obscurely.

The New Testament revealed the Son and gave us a glimpse of the divinity of the Spirit...” as noted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* “Chapter 3: I believe in the Holy Spirit” http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c3.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ see Galatians 4:4-6 and 5:13, 14

^{iv} Galatians 4:22

^v N.T. Wright *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* 73

^{vi} see Thomas W. Gillespie “Galatians 5:1, 13-25” *The Lectionary Commentary: Acts and the Epistles* 296

^{vii} N.T. Wright *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians* 73

^{viii} see Galatians 5:16, 24, 25

^{ix} Carol E. Holtz-Martin “Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Homiletical Perspective” *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*.

^x Mary Hinckle Shore “Commentary on Acts 2:1-4; Galatians 4:1-7 and/or Galatians 5:16-26” www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3257