



“The True Sign of God’s Spirit”
Scripture – 1 Corinthians 12:1-11
Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, May 26, 2024

Last Sunday we celebrated Pentecost by reading the traditional Scripture passage from the second chapter of Acts. It describes a wild and startling moment when God’s Spirit roared through a room where the disciples of Jesus had gathered. There was a sound like the rush of a violent wind and tongues of fire rested on each disciple prompting them to speak in a foreign language. There was so much noise and commotion that some outsiders accused them of having an over-the-top Frat party. “Too much wine,” they said.

Our celebration of Pentecost was – well, a bit tamer. We had red paraments and red stoles. We sang hymns and anthems about God’s Spirit. And at the end of the service, our choir set our feet tapping with a rousing rendition of “Every Time I Feel the Spirit.” Still, no one felt the need to grab fire extinguishers. It’s safe to say that our celebration of Pentecost did not resemble the one described in the Book of Acts.

I heard that one time a congregation in New York cranked up some huge industrial fans to blow over the people in the pews. While the choir sang about God’s Spirit, the people could hear and feel the wind. A colleague notes that “some old European cathedrals were designed with Holy Spirit holes so that rose petals could be dropped upon the congregation from above representing flames of fire.”¹ Some churches in Africa beat dozens of drums to mimic the sound of a mighty wind. Maybe next year something wild and mysterious will happen at Westminster and we will all be stirred by powerful and passionate emotions.

Some Christians believe that if you do not have some sort of ecstatic experience, then you are unacquainted with God’s Spirit. There is something lacking in you. Your faith is faint.

But as one writer pointed out recently, “Having a powerful experience may or may not signify the Spirit’s presence. It could be real. But it could also be manufactured show or self-delusion or overwrought emotion or just plain indigestion.”²

As you know, the Apostle Paul wrote letters to several congregations – Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus... In these letters he spoke a great deal about God’s Spirit, yet he never mentioned the ecstatic experience

of the disciples described in the Book of Acts. In fact, one of the problems Paul had to tap down was that in some churches there were individuals who had powerful emotional experiences of the Spirit and they considered themselves superior to those who did not experience such passionate outbreaks. They believed that their highly-charged mystical experience was proof that God's Spirit filled them, and therefore they were closer to God.

Paul said, "Not so."

We hear what Paul had to say in today's passage: "Concerning spiritual gifts, I do not want you to be ignorant...there are a variety of gifts, but they all emanate from God's Spirit. Some have the gift of knowledge, some wisdom, some healing, some prophecy, some working powerful deeds, and some speaking in tongues." But these gifts are not to be placed in a pecking order. Different gifts are not given to benefit some at the expense of others. What is the true purpose of having such gifts? Paul says, that all are to be used for the **common good**. Their differences were not reasons for splitting into separate factions, but rather for enriching the entire Body of Christ.

It is critical for us to note that God's Spirit is not for a select few. God's Spirit did not only fill great theologians like some of those in our stained-glass window or wise religious leaders or dedicated missionaries or people who devote their lives to serving the poor and oppressed. God's Spirit speaks to the heart and soul of all people. God Spirit speaks to you. Yes, you!

Theologian James Gertmenian writes, "We cannot ask others to be spiritual for us, to make moral choices for us, to think for us. The supreme glory and staggering burden of being human is that we each bear in our mortal bodies the spirit of the eternal. We bear in our limited minds the spirit of God's wisdom. We each bear in our flawed souls the spirit of goodness...you are meant to be no bystander, hearing the tongues of the wise and the good and the soulful, admiring them from afar...You and I are meant to join the wise and the good and the soulful, to stand on our own feet as children of God."³

If we read the remainder of the 12th chapter of First Corinthians, we find that Paul compares the members of a church to the different parts of a human body. A body needs a variety of different parts – eyes, ears, hands, feet, and so on. In a similar way, a church needs people with different gifts in order to be complete.

And then, Paul makes the pivotal move. He says that none of our gifts will amount to anything if we are not filled with the spirit of love. For those who have an ecstatic experience and speak in tongues, Paul says that it amounts to nothing more than a clanging cymbal if they do not love. If someone has the gift of prophecy or wisdom, but does not love, his gifts are worthless. If someone has the gift of knowledge or faith, but does not love, her gifts are inconsequential.

Theologian Richard Rohr writes that the gift of God's Spirit is "being able to love as God does...We see the world on the brink of destruction, yet we are too often apathetic about it. We hear of wars and famines, yet we choose to ignore them. We watch the earth degrade around us, and we simply adjust our thermostats. Too many of us just want to be left alone, not bothered by someone else – not even God – making demands on us. All of this is evidence of something missing in our lives."⁴

In her new book, Anne Lamott asks a question that all of us should ponder. She asks, “Do I want to be right or to have a loving heart?” Then, in her most succinct sentence, she says something to which all of us can nod our heads. She says, “Not-love is killing us.”

Focused on our current predicament, she writes: “Are love and compassion up to the stark realities we face at the dinner table, and down the street, and at the melting ice caps, and our own Congress? Maybe; I think so. Somehow...One day at a time, and sometimes one hour at a time, love will be enough to see us through, get us back on our feet and dust us off. Love gives us a shot at becoming the person we were born to be.”⁵

A Presbyterian minister remembers the time he took a youth group on a working mission trip. They “were working at Betty’s home which was nestled in the shadows of Appalachia. Her home was a lime green trailer where she lived with her mother, who was suffering from dementia. The trailer was carved into the mountainside, and the mountain was eroding, threatening to push her trailer off the mountain. The group was building a retaining wall. It was the hardest labor he had ever done. By Thursday, he could tell that they were not going to finish. They were doing more than battling a mountain; they were battling poverty, and poverty is a mighty enemy. Each day at lunchtime, Betty invited the work group to bring their dirty, smelly bodies and rest on her porch. They ate peanut butter and jelly or ham and cheese, and on Thursday the pastor closed his eyes for a moment. On Monday, they had filled lunch time with laughter, but by Thursday they mostly sat in an exhausted silence.”

“Suddenly, he had his power nap disturbed. Someone was hammering. Thompson had gotten up, walked back to the wall and was hammering rebar to secure another crosstie in the wall. Thompson was a ninth-grader who had spent most of his time on the trip complaining that his mother made him come on this trip to Scott County, Tennessee. He wanted the pastor to understand that he was far too cool for this kind of work. But on Thursday, he did not stop for lunch. He walked back to the wall. The pastor called out to him: ‘Thompson, what are you doing? You need to take a break.’ The youth replied, ‘Rev., what is she going to do? No one even knows she’s here. Rev., we have to finish this wall.’”⁶

If that’s not a sign of God’s Spirit surging in a person’s life, I don’t know what is. Love is what makes life worth living. Love is what can save us from madness. Love is what can help us overcome divisions. Love is our best hope.

NOTES

1. Agnes Norfleet, “Still Many Things to Say,” May 19, 2024.
2. Mary Luti, “It Could Be Indigestion,” *The Daily Devotional of the United Church of Christ*, May 19, 2024.
3. James Gertmenian, “Who Speaks for God?” *Journal for Preachers: Pentecost 2023*, p.27.
4. Richard Rohr, “Welcome the Holy Spirit,” *Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditations*, May 20, 2024.
5. Anne Lamott, *Somehow: Thought on Love*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2024), p. 9.
6. Tom Are, “A Glimpse of God’s Last Act of Love,” April 21, 2019.

Prayers of the People ~ Dick Jolly

Eternal God, we come before you this morning with thanksgiving for your message of hope and love. And we also come with a variety of needs, concerns, and challenges. Some of us are celebrating graduations and new beginnings. Some of us are dealing with health issues or the loss of family members – or both. Some of us are joyful and some of us are sorrowful. And yet, O God, we seek to be united in following your ways and in your assurance that you are with us throughout the many experiences that life can – and will – bring our way. We are called to be united in caring for each other. And for this, we seek, and need, your presence.

We are thankful for each other and the unique and diverse gifts you have bestowed on each of us. We are grateful that we are called to use the talents that you have given us for the common good. And, we pray that as we do so we will reflect your Spirit and your love for the world. For we know, as the Bible tells us, “now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

O God, we also pause on this Memorial Day weekend to express our deep gratitude for the veterans who have served our country in times of need and uncertainty. They have assured that America remains as a beacon of hope and freedom for the world. Our veterans have given so much to each of us through their sacrifice and their service. As we celebrate and remember Memorial Day we ask for your special blessing on those who have served us – and served you – in times of war and of peace.

Hear our prayers this morning, O God, those spoken and those unspoken and grant us the assurance, the peace and the inspiration that come only from you and your Spirit. This we ask with praise and gratitude in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, who taught us how to live and taught us how to pray saying...**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen**