

"The Spirit at Work Within Us"

This passage in Acts finds Paul in Ephesus just after a well-known preacher of the day, Apollos, had visited there. But when Paul questions the new believers about their baptism, specifically asking if they had received the Holy Spirit, they had no idea what he was talking about. When I read this, I wondered if they were Presbyterians! Truth be told, the Holy Spirit is a subject that is usually reserved in Presbyterian circles for Pentecost and Trinity Sunday. Other than that, it is not something that we seem to dwell on. It's not that we deny the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives – we just don't talk about it very much.

However, the more I studied this passage as we walk together through the book of Acts in order to discern what it means to "be the church", I began to think that this might just be the most relevant passage we have considered all summer long! But, before delving into why I feel that way, let's take a look at what Paul meant in the first place.

It seems that in the Book of Acts, a person's baptismal experience is an indication of his or her spiritual experience. Paul explains this when he differentiates between John's baptism and post-resurrection baptisms of his day. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance that looked forward to the promised Messiah. But Christian baptism, like ours, looks back to Christ's finished work on the cross and victorious resurrection. Once Paul explains this to the believers in Ephesus, they are eager to receive the Holy Spirit. And Luke tells us that, as soon as Paul laid hands on them they were filled with the Spirit. And so are we.

This week, a colleague in ministry called me for some guidance on how best to phrase something to her Session. While we were batting things around, I suggested she say something

along these lines: "I am in a period of discernment, seek the wisdom of the Holy Spirit" and she interrupted me and said, "That's it! You always bring the Holy Spirit into discussions and I always forget." Friends, I will tell you that I absolutely feel in my heart that if the Holy Spirit were not guiding my thoughts, my actions, my studies, my efforts then I could not write one sermon, prepare one lesson or offer one prayer. When I give credit to the Spirit for my answers, it is not just a politically correct answer - I mean it from the bottom of my soul! And when I don't seek the Spirit's involvement, I always end up in a heap of trouble!

So I was pleased when I went on the PC(USA) website, logged onto the office of Theology, Formation and Evangelism to look up what we believe about the Holy Spirit and found this answer. "The coming of God as Holy Spirit into our lives is always simultaneously both individual and corporate." Do you know what that means to our discussion of "being the church"? It says to me, plain and simple, that without the presence, guidance and comfort of the Holy Spirit we CANNOT be the church! PERIOD! We must receive it individually and as a group.

Now at this point, I suppose I could in true Presbyterian fashion offer three points and a poem about the Holy Spirit - something classic like the Holy Spirit guides us, teaches us, and prays for us. Or perhaps I could offer up some words about the fruit of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. But that would be a nine point sermon and we would never beat the Baptist to lunch. So let's talk about something else.

This passage first and foremost teaches us that the Holy Spirit makes us all prophets. Now you may be thinking – I don't have the power to foresee the future. And that *is* one definition of prophecy. But Webster's also says a prophet is one who is "an effective or

leading spokesman for a cause, doctrine, or group". Or to say it another way, a prophet is one who speaks in God's name on behalf of God's work in the world. Now knowing that we all have access to the Holy Spirit, every one of us here is called to be a prophet. And since God doesn't call the equipped, but rather equips the called, we are all ready to go to work in the prophesy business.

And if ever the world needed to hear about God's work, friends it is today! In his book Let Me Tell You a Story, minister Tony Campolo talks about all the reasons that people have to be discouraged or even depressed in today's world. He is quick to point out that there are a variety of reasons that depression occurs and that God may not be the only answer. Chemical imbalances require medication; abusive situations require change; money issues require finding jobs or budgeting differently or changing our spending habits. I think you understand what I mean.

But then he goes on to say, "I have to contend that, over all, those who have experienced the fullness of God's Spirit in their lives give ample testimony that whatever one's state may be, the Holy Spirit lifts us up to higher ground." What a hopeful and promising thought. And I can say for certain that this church has experienced and continues to experience the fullness of God's Spirit. That is evidenced in the work and worship that takes place here. So we know that we dwell on that higher ground as we seek to be prophets as individuals *and* as the body of Christ.

Another gift of the Holy Spirit that we may not always recognize is forgiveness. Baptism by water in Biblical times and in ours is symbolic of the cleansing of our sin. But as I mentioned before, this was a precursor to the baptism of the Holy Spirit that we all have the opportunity to receive. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit changes the

concrete shape of our faith. Because once we have union with God in Christ AND the coming of the Holy Spirit into our lives, we experience forgiveness. And once we have been given forgiveness, we are called to give it away.

The story is told in Spain of a father and his teenage son who had a relationship that became strained. So the son ran away from home. His father, however, began a journey in search of his rebellious child. Finally, in Madrid, in a last desperate effort to find him, the father put an ad in the newspaper. The ad read, "Dear Paco, Meet me in front of the newspaper office tomorrow at noon. All is forgiven. I love you. Your father."

The next day at noon, in front of the newspaper office, 800 "Pacos" showed up. They were all seeking forgiveness and love from their fathers. Forgiveness seems to be a tricky business for everyone – even, no sometimes especially, for Christians. But the truth is that every one of us in this sanctuary has at one time been "Paco" seeking forgiveness from someone we love. And every one of us here has been the father as well, desperate to forgive.

The Holy Spirit is the reconciler in our lives that helps us have the courage to both give and seek forgiveness of sins. This is true, not only in our personal lives but in our life as a church. We do not always agree with our brothers and sisters, even if we sit next to them on the pew or in the choir loft every Sunday. We do not always approve of everything our Session, our ministers, or our denomination decides. Sometimes hurtful things happen in churches. But if we are to make a difference in the world as we witness to God's work, forgiveness is the best way to stay grounded in our common truths rather than getting sidetracked in things that we may not be able to change.

And Paul's follow up letter to the church at Ephesus with regards to the power of the Holy Spirit may be the most practical for us at Nazareth Presbyterian in our job as prophets.

Paul reminds us that it was the work of the Spirit *specifically* that enabled him to encounter Jesus Christ after he already reigned in Heaven. It was the work of the Holy Spirit *specifically* that commissioned him to preach to the Gentiles so that ALL the world could come know the grace of our Lord. And it is the work of the Spirit *specifically* that will enable us to go from this place and tell others that they are heirs of the promise of God, even when they might not know it.

This is Paul's way of reminding us that the work that the Spirit calls us to and empowers us for is not up to one man, one woman or one group. The Spirit is available to us all and therefore to be tapped into and shared by us all.

It does no good for the minister to seek the Spirit when writing the message if all we do is comment to each other at lunch, "That was a nice sermon" and then go on living as we always have. The presence of the Spirit is wasted if the Session seeks the will of the Spirit and the church congratulates them for a job well done but does nothing concrete to support their efforts. The Spirit fills us with its fruit so that we can bear that fruit into the world, not let it rot on the shelf as we give thanks for it but never use it.

The Holy Spirit is in short, the most intimate and mysterious presence with and in us. God as Creator gives us our very existence and Christ our Savior sets us free from the bondage of sin through his life, death and resurrection. By this we know that God sets in motion the course that we are to live on. But it is the working of the Spirit in our lives that speaks to us through the beauty of a sunrise, the truth of a child's honest question, the word that we may not want to hear from an adversary and the reality of the power that dwells within us.

Frederick Buechner says that the "Spirit is highly contagious". He says that "when people are very happy or very sad, you can catch it from them as easily as measles or a yawn. You can catch it from what they say or from what they do or just from what happens to the air of

a room without saying or doing anything." (1) This is how easy it is for us to share the Spirit that is alive in each of us and all of us.

So as we seek to be the church and to be the bold prophets that God calls and equips us to be, to forgive one another as God has forgiven us, may we be as welcoming of the Holy Spirit in our lives as those in Ephesus were. The world is waiting for some good news and we are all that God has to share it. By the power of the Spirit we can, we must and we shall. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(1) Wishful Thinking, Frederick Buechner, Harper San Francisco, 1973, p.110.