

"The Spirit of God, The Spirit of Aliveness"

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Sunday, May 23, 2021

Texts: John 3: 1-16 and Acts 2: 1-21

Understanding the Holy Spirit is kind of like trying to grab Jell-O. It slips through your fingers without ever really getting a hold of it. That's both good news and bad news. The bad news is that of the three persons of the Trinity: Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is the least concrete, the least able to fit into a religious dogma or category, well, it's just plain hard to get a hold of. That is also the good news. It's hard to get a hold of and "blows where it will" and moves into and through our lives in ways that we never completely understand, but we know we have been changed. In the words of Brian McLaren, author of the book we've been using this year, *We Make the Road by Walking*, "the Spirit invigorates, animates, purifies, holds mystery, moves and flows, foments joy and spreads peace."

For example, in the first chapter of Genesis, God's Spirit hovers over the primal waters like *wind*, creating beauty and novelty out of chaos. The Spirit then animates living creatures like *breath*. Then, in Exodus, God's Spirit appears as *fire* in the burning bush, beckoning Moses, and then as a pillar of *cloud and fire* moving across the wilderness, cooling by day, and warming by night, and leading the way to freedom. Centuries later, when

John the Baptist comes on the scene, he says that just as he immerses and marks people with *water*, his successor will immerse and mark people with the Spirit. When John baptizes Jesus, bystanders see the Spirit descending like a *dove* upon him. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus dramatizes his mission by turning water, which is kept in stone containers used for religious ceremonies, into a huge quantity of *wine* to infuse joy at a wedding banquet. Later, he promises people that if they trust him, they will experience rivers of living *water* springing up from within.

Whew! That's a lot of descriptions of the Spirit. Maybe that is why it is so hard to understand. Maybe, but this is exactly what has been needed since the beginning of time and is really needed now.

You may have heard that more and more people have determined that they are "spiritual, but not religious". Church people look at one another and say, "what does that mean?" Exactly. The church, in many forms, has lost the Spirit. We have been too concretized into forms of worship, religious dogma, and rules such that we have left the Spirit out of our lives, and the Spirit has left the building. The Spirit animates everything we do and encourages us to go deeper than any faith statement or religious practice on its own can ever do. McLaren tells us that the word *spiritual* means a lot of things, but for us, it will mean any experience of or response to the moving the Spirit of God in our lives and in our world.

I must admit that it is hard for me to encounter the Spirit in church. That is because most churches in our tradition don't have a lot of movement at all, let alone of the Spirit. The Spirit, for me, comes in the actions of children that most of the time gets them in trouble, but shows their innocence and their genuine response to whatever is going on. I've had more than one parent or grandparent dive under the pews because of something their dear one said in Kids' Chat. And yet, kids often say what we adults think, but we're afraid to say. Kids are always, okay almost always, for me the embodiment of the Spirit. Sometimes I encounter the Spirit in song, when we get to clapping with the rhythm, or sing a spiritual, or mix up the tempo of various verses in a hymn. Or when someone spontaneously has an "amen" or laughs out loud before they catch themselves. All of those are spiritual moments. Yes, spiritual moments can come in silence, and often you can feel the movement of the Spirit even in meditation. But that would mean a departure from the routine. Most church services, no matter their size or content, are often routine. The Spirit deliberately breaks up routine and calls out of our boxes. McLaren says it this way, "At the core of Jesus' life and message, then, was this good news: The Spirit of God, the Spirit of aliveness, the Wind-breath-fire-cloud-water-wine-dove Spirit who filled Jesus is on the move in our world. And that gives us a choice: do we dig in our heels, clench our first, and live

our own agenda, or do we let go, let be, and let come...and be so taken up by the Spirit's movement? That's what the disciples experienced on the day of Pentecost. Suddenly, everything changed.

Honestly, I tend to meet the Spirit on a hike or maybe a bike ride, I bet that's no surprise! This week, I got a chance to hike yet another new section of the North Country Trail along the Jordan River near the Jordan River fish hatchery. Besides the beauty of the river, there was an eagle pair, along with a nest that had to have eaglet or more in it. The birds were making all kinds of noise. I had no idea eagles made noise. Then I saw two orioles, the first I've seen in the wild (you know, away from bird feeders). That doesn't even mention the river itself. The most beautiful stretch I've seen so far. I was filled to overflowing. Ever have that feeling? Just so full your joy oozes out your pores and you can't control it. That, I believe, is Spirit. The poor people I met coming down the trail (the most I've seen on any trail so far this year) all got to hear from me how beautiful it was just up ahead, the eagles, the orioles, the river. They probably thought I was crazy. I guess I was. Not the first time nor the last.

The Spirit moves us to say what we otherwise would keep to ourselves for fear of the reaction of others. It gives us spontaneity, and it can drive us to great

joy, or drive us into the wilderness to deal with that which we must deal with in the course of our lives. The Spirit challenges us, grows us, exhorts us, and moves us off the static nature of our lives and routines. This can happen to persons and to whole communities. In the Acts passage, the disciples become so full of the Spirit that they are accused of being drunk. They talk in languages they didn't know they could. Our rational brains say, "impossible". And then we try to say that with God all things are possible and don't even realize how opposed those two statements are to one another.

I'm not trying to diss the church – not this one, nor any church – but I think much of the Western Christian church is caught up in routine, formula, entertainment evangelism, and using a lot of words to such an extent that there isn't room for the freedom that comes from the Spirit. McLaren notes that "in a world full of big challenges, in a time like ours, we can't settle for a heavy and fixed religion. We can't try to contain the Spirit in a box. We need to experience the mighty rushing wind of Pentecost. We need our hearts to be made incandescent by the Spirit's fire. We need the living water and new wine Jesus promised, so our hearts can become the home of dovelike peace. In this way, we join Jesus in the dynamic, surprising uprising of resurrection. The surrender,

silence, emptiness, and rest of letting go and letting be make us receptive to something new....and so we experience a letting come of the Spirit of God.

Let it come. Let us be filled with the Spirit such that it oozes out of our pores. Not just today. Not just on a beautiful stretch of path. Let it be so in church after church, week after week, that we not contain the Spirit, and in doing so unbind ourselves as well.

May God rock this world, this church, these people and fill us to depths of our soul with a Spirit that is always setting us free.

Let it be so. Let it be now. Amen.