

Fruits of the Spirit

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Eagle River, Wisconsin
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Text: Acts 2:1-21

“She didn’t go to church, but she was very spiritual.” That observation, or something close to it, has been offered to me more than once by relatives of someone who died whom I didn’t know, but for whom I was asked to conduct a funeral or graveside or memorial service. It’s not that I ever made church attendance, or even church membership, a requirement to do a funeral or a committal service for someone. There are churches in this area for whom “membership in good standing” is a requirement for having a pastor do that, but I never served in a church that had that policy, and, quite frankly, I never would. But maybe it’s the fear of rejection, or perhaps lack of enthusiasm on my part that has led people to take pains to assure me that a beloved family member, despite seldom having darkened a church door, was nevertheless very spiritual, prayed regularly, believed in God.

The thing is, I believe them—just as I believe someone who tells me that they’re not religious, but that they’re very spiritual. There are, after all, way too many people who have been beaten down by religion, who have experienced religion and the church as judgmental and exclusionary, people who have been harangued from the pulpit about who they are and who they aren’t, what they’ve done and what they haven’t done. Too many people have been made to feel unworthy by those who consider the Bible to be not so much a source of inspiration and a beloved companion through life, as a weapon that has been wielded against them, something that has been used to make them feel lousy about themselves. A former pastor of mine liked to say that there are lots of church people who use the Bible the way an inebriated person uses a lamppost—for support rather than for enlightenment, for confirmation of their prejudices rather than confrontation with the Word. Mark Twain said that most people have just enough religion to make themselves miserable.

So I understand the retreat from religion. In fact, if I didn't have a church like this one, and if I hadn't been blessed by others like it throughout my life, I too may have been among the throngs of the un-churched. But on this Sunday, a Sunday which is devoted to the gift of the Holy Spirit, I'd like to reflect with you about what we mean by being spiritual, what it looks like to be filled with the Spirit. I want to explore spirituality with you because, quite frankly, invoking spirituality as an excuse for avoiding the discipline of faith can be a sign not only of impatience with the narrowness of religion, which is fine and even healthy, but also of laziness, which isn't. Spirituality too often is considered to be a soft alternative to religion when it should be a demanding corrective to what too often passes for religion.

Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles tells of the coming of the Spirit into the midst of a crowd of followers of Jesus as they gathered for the Jewish feast of *Shavuot*. This holy day in the Jewish calendar, which is observed fifty days after Passover, Pentecost, commemorates the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. In biblical times, it was one of the occasions in the Jewish year that entailed a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and that's why we have all those unfamiliar names of peoples and places, the Pentecost reader's nightmare, in today's reading from Acts. People came to Jerusalem for Pentecost because they were supposed to come to Jerusalem for Pentecost, no matter where they lived. People who shared a faith but not a language came together from all over the known world for the common purpose of giving thanks to God for the gift of the Law. It's rather like the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, where people from all over the world, speaking the widest imaginable array of different languages, join in common worship of one God, repeating their prayers in one language, the language believed by Muslims to be God's language, Arabic. For the Jews gathered in Jerusalem, the one language they would have had in common was already a dead language, the language of the Law given to Moses, ancient Hebrew.

The original Pentecost, the one in the Sinai desert, occurred against the backdrop of the liberation of the Jews. Passover, you'll remember, commemorates the Exodus from Egypt. But soon after the Israelites had escaped the despotism of Pharaoh, they discovered that it was a struggle to cope with their new-found freedom. They had traded their chains for the uncertainties of the desert, and again and again, they were showing signs of preferring the certainties of the chains. God's manna wasn't as tasty as the Egyptian food they remembered, and water wasn't as certain in the wilderness. And, most of all,

the future was frightening, and those tempting idols that surrounded them were so much less demanding than the God who had freed them, the one who was constantly reminding them that they had been freed for a greater purpose. So God had given Moses the Law to help those disgruntled Israelites to come to terms with their freedom.

At Pentecost, the Jews and the Gentile converts who had become followers of Jesus were also trying to come to terms with their own new, and terrifying, freedom, a freedom that for now felt like abandonment. Jesus was gone. He had ascended, and when his disciples had scoured the skies for a glimpse of him, an angel had asked them what they were doing looking to the heavens. They had things to do, not heavens to contemplate. They were to be witnesses to Jesus not only in the Jewish heartland and the neighboring territories of Judea and Samaria, but also in places they'd never heard of. They were to go to the very ends of the earth.

I'm sure that the followers of Jesus who constituted the earliest church would have preferred to get their marching orders from the man himself, the Word Made Flesh, a Jesus who would be with them in the flesh. But he was gone. So if that wasn't possible, maybe they could have it all neatly written down for them in a book? But that wasn't what Jesus had promised them. Jesus hadn't promised them a book, or a reincarnation of himself, or even a successor who would assume his role among them; Jesus had promised them a Spirit.

And the Spirit came to them, just as Jesus had said it would. They weren't going to find the Spirit through their own efforts to ascend to the level of God; the Spirit would come to them, would descend upon them. The Spirit would come to them not in a moment of silent and lonely reverie, but in a big and disorderly crowd scene. The Spirit was not to come to them in quiet philosophical reflection; the Spirit was to come to them in wind and fire, in the excited outbursts of people who suddenly were eloquent in languages they didn't even know existed, in the thunder of lives transformed by the Spirit's very presence. The disciples of Jesus didn't lift themselves up to a spiritual realm; the Spirit came down to them, came to them so boisterously that the people watching them thought they were drunk.

That's why I'm a little suspicious of much of what passes for spirituality. If we follow the Pentecost account, there are important marks of the spirit that have little to do with the solitude and private faith

that is often associated in the popular mind with spirituality, with being filled with the Spirit. Spirituality doesn't have as much to do with a lonely ascent to the divine as it has to do with God's spirit coming to us here, where we are, here among disorderly humanity. It has to do not with our transcending our humanity; but rather it has to do with our becoming more fully human. Christian spirituality isn't about our achieving a kind of nirvana through our separation from this world; it's about striving for wholeness in and with the world. That's what the "holy" part of Holy Spirit is about. That word "holy" comes from a word that means "to be whole, to be healed, to be fulfilled."

And this brings us back to that comment I have heard so often about not being religious, but spiritual. I resonate with it if by religion we mean sterile belief in a set of theological propositions and adherence to rules and regulation. I resonate with that sentiment if by spirituality we mean an effort to infuse the discipline of religion with the spirit of faith, faith that acts, faith that lives not only in the mind but also in the heart and in the body. I'm afraid, though, that spirituality often is understood to be somehow other-worldly, transcending the messiness of human existence. The true spirit, the Holy Spirit, comes to us precisely when we are our most messy, when we are most divided. The Spirit doesn't "take us away from all this;" the Spirit moves us to transform all this.

We often refer to Pentecost as the birthday of the church. And it is. But it's not the kind of birthday that we mark off on our calendars, even as we lament the growing gap between the date of our own birth and the birthday milestones that we mark every year during our life's journey. Each Pentecost should be a birth-day; on each Pentecost, the church should be born anew among us; on each Pentecost we should commit ourselves to be open to the spirit of renewal, of reinvigoration. On Pentecost we don't celebrate something that happened; we rejoice in something that is happening. We don't celebrate the church as it is, or get nostalgic for what it as it has been, but rather we envision and long for the church as it should be, as it can be. In this post-pandemic (at least I hope we're post-pandemic) in this post-pandemic phase of our church's history, we're different. We've lost some people, both to the pandemic itself and to its effects on our communal togetherness. If we measure ourselves by the standards of the past, it's a problem. But if we expect, as Jesus promised, that the Spirit will breathe new life into us, it's a moment of possibility. It's a time when we might begin to speak a new language in a world that has changed.

So Pentecost, this Pentecost, should be exciting. It should enliven us with the fires of enthusiasm--and remember that the original meaning of that word "enthusiasm" is "having God in us." The church should be both the dwelling place and the launching pad of the spirit, so much so that we might be able sincerely to say about that person who never went to church, "She didn't go to church? Too bad. She really missed something." Amen.