

The Living Spirit

Menno Mennonite Church

May 26, 2024

Purpose: To embrace the role of the Spirit in sustaining our life and living.

Message: As people of Spirit we are invited into the work of Spirit not as those enslaved to obligation, but those enlivened by God's work in us.

Scripture: Romans 8:10-17 (I Will Read); John 3:1-10 (Please read)

Synopsis: Christian discipleship is a work in progress. We know well that there is always more that we can—should—be about in realizing the nature of Christ in our life and living. Sometimes we have the sense that our lives of faith are about the proficiency of our performance. We expect the coming of the Spirit to be a work of the accomplishment of our goals. Yet this is not what is promised to us. We are given the Spirit that the work of being attached to the Spirit, born of the Spirit, and there by shaped by and within the way of Christ is a process of God at work in us. We are dead to the works of the body as Paul writes that the righteousness of God's way might find further expression within our life and living. It is God's good work in us and through us that brings forth the fruit of the Spirit and the life of the soul.

Romans 8:10-17 Message

But for you who welcome him, in whom he dwells—
even though you still experience all the limitations of sin—
you yourself experience life on God's terms.

It stands to reason, doesn't it,
that if the alive-and-present God
who raised Jesus from the dead moves into your life,
he'll do the same thing in you that he did in Jesus,
bringing you alive to himself?

When God lives and breathes in you
(and he does, as surely as he did in Jesus),
you are delivered from that dead life.
With his Spirit living in you, your body will be as alive as Christ's!

¹²⁻¹⁴ So don't you see that we don't owe this old do-it-yourself life one red cent.
There's nothing in it for us, nothing at all.
The best thing to do is give it a decent burial
and get on with your new life.
God's Spirit beckons.
There are things to do and places to go!

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life.
It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike
"What's next, Papa?"
God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are.
We know who he is, and we know who we are:
Father and children.

And we know we are going to get what's coming to us
—an unbelievable inheritance!

We go through exactly what Christ goes through.
If we go through the hard times with him,
then we're certainly going to go through the good times with him

There is a shift that we all arrive at. Sooner or later we all go there: to that moment where we shift from wanting our Mom and Dad's help with things to "I want to do it myself." Followed shortly after there after by *DAD: I can brush my own hair* as sometimes we get help anyway. We may not remember it for ourselves, but likely we know it as our children grew into adulthood, though I remember a good number of rather loud episodes at which I was exerting my independence back in the day. Kids: I will fill you in on a little secret; two as a matter of fact. The first is that your Mom and Dad are always going to be just that; no matter what or how old you end up being. That means they are going to want to help you, even if you need to explain, again, that I you are a gainfully employed 48 year old who knows how to pay for lunch while flying here and there, thank you very much. They are always going to want to help you out because that is the relationship that is yours. Here's the second part: every now and then you are going to want to let them help you out because it sure feels good to be taken care of now and again. That's a good thing; enjoy it while and when you can.

For we parents, there is that mix of pride, frustration, and, occasionally, a pinch of grief along the way. Pride because the most important things of raising an independent person are being done. Frustration in the part where sometimes thinking you are ready for something and actually being ready are two different things. Grief, of course, is the self-explanatory process that comes with what was and what now is. As good as it is, it doesn't mean that it doesn't feel something too along the way.

Yet it is in the nature of things that we insist on becoming our own, individual, persons, with our own abilities, giftings and ways in the world. We take pride in the which is ours and ours alone. We take great pains in the life that we build—the work that we do, the world that we construct, the way that we live. We take note of our achievements and abilities, marking the firsts that we are able to take on ourselves: first car, first job, first home—it keeps going. We are rightly proud of what we can achieve when we put our minds to it. We even take pains in developing ourselves as well practiced in our way of being in our life and our faith. We might even note, now and again, the pride and way that we can be in and of the body in our way of being.

Last Sunday we celebrated Pentecost what I think is the most ill understood date on the Christian calendar (which is saying something because there are a lot of dates that don't make great sense on the Christian calendar). We celebrate; we know it; we hear the familiar words and

stories, but seldom do we know what to do with it. Seldom have we encountered the winds blowing as they will and found the Spirit of the Living God within them. The notion of tongues of fire and speaking ecstatically in ways that we don't understand is not part of our regular programming. Indeed, most of the signs of the Spirit as broadly manifested and advertised by our brothers and sisters in Christ are not always well understood by us here and now. We know service, community, humility, the body. All of which can indeed worry us sometimes. There is a fair critique of Mennonite/Anabaptist thought that points to our relatively weak sense of the Spirit and the working of Spirit (Pneumatology if you want the \$15 dollar word for it). When you read anabaptist thought and practice you just don't hear a whole lot about the Spirit, except to say that it is the working force and presence of the 3-part trinity that enables us to follow and live faithful lives as part of the kingdom. And not a whole lot more.

What I think confuses us about the Spirit is that we expect that is something that is, ultimately about us. We take the position of the emerging child that knows and works, and does and we declare that this is something that we must "do for ourselves". This leaves us trying and working at bringing about the Spirit, reaching for it, demanding it, wanting it, and, perhaps, reproaching ourselves when we fall short of what ever mark we set ourselves for accomplishing "having the Spirit". So much about our way of following and way being in the world and following Jesus has to do with what WE do. What is it that we believe, or not. How do we pray or not. What are the ways in which we follow along. There are any numbers of books, teachers, and methods that clearly claim their formula for getting Christianity RIGHT, and doing it the right way, we Mennonites not least among them (why do you think we have been bickering between each other so often and so long except that we each know that we are right). We take on the insistence that it is we, what we do that manifests the love, peace, joy, patience, kindness, faithfulness and self-control that the Spirit brings. In fact we readily grown impatient that we lack the self-control to make the working of the Spirit work for us, which is a bit of a fairly vicious loop.

Which is why I find the notion of the Spirit that Paul presents here so appealing: It places the working of the Spirit where it rightfully belongs: with the Spirit. He puts it clearly (or as clearly as Paul is able to when he is making an argument. *If Christ is in you , your body is dead because of sin but your Spirit is alive because of righteousness* (v10). It bears mentioning here that the righteousness spoken of here is not our righteousness, or anything that we ourselves

generate from within, but is the working of the Spirit within us. What he is saying time and again is that the working of God changing us, the movement of God convicting us, the inspiration of God motivating us is not something that we ourselves come up with. We are the body. We are what here is dead; it is God's Spirit that is making us alive and that is enabling anything of the good works within us. Pentecost comes upon disciples and new believers alike not because they were the select few that had the proper insight to get what God was up to. This was the same crowd who only days before were wondering at the impossibility of risen Lord and accepting the all-too-real evidence before them that told them that Christ was in the grave. The Spirit comes and enables them because it was God's good will do so. It is within this gift that they move and breath. It is from this gift that they speak what they have seen and heard. It is from this gift that they were then changed to the apostles that they now are speaking for the kingdom as the Spirit gives them strength.

This is a really hard concept to grasp because we are so used to operating in the world as it is where we earn all that we can and achieve all that we want by our own excellence and practice. The Spirit doesn't operate on those rules. It operates on the same rules that God operates so well and so often: it comes because it is the will of God to make all alive even as Christ is alive. Think back to the famous Nicodemus story that Emily read for us. It is easy to poh-poh his bafflement at the words that Jesus was laying down: being born again. But he was applying much the same logic that we so often apply as well. We assume that everything that God is doing lives or dies on our ability to do it ourselves. Of course we cannot affect our own rebirth. But God can. And God does. God brings life in abundance time and again because that is what God does and how God is, much like the parenting help that brings, hopefully, that which is best for us, even if we think we are past that.

The Spirit of God that raises Christians—all Christians of all stipes and varieties not matter how they then go on to show it—does not bring things out in us to make us slaves to our obligation to get it right or practice it more, but to remind us who we are, and more so WHOSE we are along the way. We are children of the living God and it is our status as children that God grants us what we need. It is easy to think that it is we who must find the way to make all of this work, to make the Spirit real; so much so that we begin to fear that we may never measure up to the task. To be sure—there are things that we do work at to practice the Spirit. Our prayer, devotion, meditation and just plain listening are all workings of developing the Spirit. But we

cannot confuse those spiritual disciplines with that which we do to accomplish Spiritual life. We do those things in study and in hope to better attune ourselves to the working of the Spirit that is around us, to become more and more aware of the Pentecost that has already happened around us and continues within us and around us when we let it. The work of the Spirit is not about us; I don't think that can be said too often or too clearly: it is not about us. We are the recipients of the connection, the beneficiaries of the adoption and the medium in which the Spirit chooses to create all that God is doing. But the working of God is the working of the father who is time and again bringing out that which is best in us and in our world even when we ourselves tend to stand in the way of the Kingdom coming on Earth as it is in heaven. The Spirit is; the Spirit Moves. We like branches are but invited to be filled and to dance as we may.

We are so ready to question our status as Children of the living God who is our loving, doting, amazed parent. The one who is always going to do that which they can for you because that is what a good parent does. That is what God is up to. God works with us—who we are and as we are—to bring us to life, and life fully so. God Spirit comes to us to move us, change us and help us work as we may. The Spirit reminds us, each of us, of this greatest truth—that we are beloved of God—and in that, we can never go wrong.

May we move and change in the Spirit, and be moved as God wills, never forgetting that we need not do it ourselves, but only as the Spirit wills.