

## THE SPIRIT OF THE CHRIST

[..FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#) of Kissimmee, Florida

Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

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# THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST

## John 14:8-17 (NRSV)

[Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." \[9\] Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? \[10\] Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. \[11\] Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. \[12\] Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. \[13\] I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.](#)

[\[14\] If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.](#)

### The Spirit of Christ

**[15] "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. [16] And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. [17] This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.**

SPIRITUALITY DEFINED

Many Americans think of themselves as “spiritual” but fewer now see themselves as “religious”. Often somebody will say something like, “I’m spiritual but I don’t want to be a part of any organized religion.” I always want to retort, “So, you would be open to joining a disorganized religion?” But, I restrain myself.

I am intrigued though by this search for spirituality in our society. What, exactly does it mean to be “spiritual”?

When I ask that question, the answer I get varies depending upon the speaker. Sometimes spirituality is defined as being true to one’s deepest love or passion. Quite young people are advised to follow their passion, to do what that care about or believe in most deeply. This is seen as a spiritual quest.

Some find a kind of spirituality in the discovery of something new. In this sense scientists are very spiritual people. They are always on a quest to know more about the world in which we live. Spirituality and knowledge are often equated.

Still others define spirituality as a mysterious experience that cannot be explained or measured in any way. In this case, spirituality is more about emotion and intuition. It is the lifelong struggle to know and experience a God who is above us and beyond us.

Sometimes people define spirituality as a rejection of materialism and a return to nature. Many of us have said something like, “I love to just get away from the hubbub of the city and bask in the solace of nature. I can worship God much better on a mountaintop or on a lake than I can in church.” (I hear this one a lot around this time of year!)

Don’t misunderstand. I’m not being critical of these understandings of what it means to be spiritual. Sometimes I too have had a sense of the spiritual when I have followed my passion, discovered something new, experienced a haunting emotion or witnessed a sunset on a mountaintop.

But, often these views of what it means to be spiritual keep us from understanding what the Bible means when it talks about the Spirit and the spiritual life. The Bible’s view of

spirituality is much more concrete and down to earth.

This past week at Bible study we talked about the fact that many people just don't know what to think when it comes to the Holy Spirit. One person said, "I just put the Holy Spirit 'over there on the shelf'. I don't know what to think about the Spirit so I don't talk too much about it and just accept what the church has to say on the matter."

I've found that this is a pretty common attitude about the Spirit for many of us. We know that Spirit is important. We accept the church's teaching that the Spirit is a part of the essence of God. But, we don't really know what to say about the Spirit.

And so we put the Spirit over there on the shelf with beliefs that we're supposed to accept but quite frankly don't understand. With the Apostle Paul we accept the fact that today we "see through a glass darkly, but one day God will explain it all."

This morning I hope to make that dark glass that we call the Spirit a little less opaque. Not only do I believe that it is possible to understand the Spirit and things spiritual; I also believe that it necessary. Our misunderstandings and half understandings of what it means to be spiritual keep us from being all that we can be in Christ Jesus.

## ABSENT THAT SUNDAY

Today is Pentecost Sunday, that Sunday when we celebrate the coming of the Spirit and the formation of the church by the power of the Spirit. One story that we usually tell comes from the book of Acts. That first Pentecost was distinguished by some pretty incredible actions.

The wind of the Spirit falls upon the disciples like tongues of fire. Even though they are all Galileans, the disciples are given the ability to proclaim the gospel in all the languages of the world. Everyone is amazed and 3,000 are added to the church that first day ... at the early service ... before 9 AM!

It's no wonder many of us don't know what to think about the Spirit. Our experience is not

like theirs. When we have the early service we just hope that everyone stays awake!

Tom Long used to teach a confirmation class in which he reviewed the events of the church year. One little girl missed a class and Tom was reviewing the material.

The little girl asked, "What is Pentecost?" And Tom said something like, "Pentecost was the time when the church was gathered, the Holy Spirit fell upon them like a mighty wind and tongues of fire and 3,000 were added to the church that day."

The little girl got all wide eyed and said, "Gosh, reverend Long, I must have been absent that Sunday." Many of us feel like that little girl when it comes to Pentecost. We were absent that Sunday. We haven't seen that kind of power. And if that's what it means to be spiritual, we could even question the validity of our own faith.

I wonder if this desire to see something more dramatic has fueled the Pentecostal movement and a desire to build the mega-church. People talk about a "second baptism," the baptism of the Spirit. They have a hunger to experience the power of the Spirit. They want another Sunday when 3,000 are received at the early service!

Even most of the mega-churches can't claim to have this kind of experience every Sunday.

I would suggest that the clearest vision of God is not often seen in mass conversions or flashy manifestations of the Spirit. The clearest vision of God is to be seen in a somewhat more mundane and down to earth fashion.

## THE HUMAN FACE OF GOD

In our lesson Philip wants a spiritual vision, a vision of God. He tells Jesus, "Show us the Father." Philip's request is reminiscent of the request that Moses made long ago. He too wanted to see God's glory.

From the very beginning men and women have been on a spiritual quest, a quest to see God more clearly. But, Moses and all those who came after him were not allowed to see God directly. The sight would be too holy. It would literally kill them. (Exodus 33:20)

But, now that has all changed. The disciples could see the Father. The disciples could see the glory of God. Where could they see this glory? They could see it in the face of Jesus.

To Philip's request Jesus replies, "I don't believe you still don't understand after being with me for so long. If you want to see the Father, look at me. I am in the Father and the Father is in me."

Next week is Trinity Sunday, but this week on Pentecost Sunday we're already considering that doctrine. If you want to see the Father, if you want to see God, look at Jesus. And, according to our lesson, Jesus and the Father will send us help in our spiritual growth. In verse 16 we read,

"And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper ..."

This Helper, this one who comes alongside us and helps us is none other than the Holy Spirit. He is the Spirit of God in Christ. The Spirit is God with us, and He is the One who enables us to carry on the ministry of God's kingdom. In fact Jesus told his disciples that they would do even great works than Him because they would be empowered by the Spirit.

Is this promise for us as well?

Will we be able to do even greater works than Jesus?

This seems impossible. But, consider this. Down through the years many good things have been done in the name of Jesus. And they have multiplied as the church has multiplied.

God, our heavenly Father chose to do His will first through Jesus and now by the power of the Spirit He chooses to work through us. We are not greater than Jesus, but many great works have been done in the name of Jesus, many more than could ever be done by one

man.

The doctrine of the Trinity illustrates not only how there is one God in three persons. We see in this passage how we too are connected to that Holy Trinity. This really illustrates the practical importance of this doctrine.

God is in Christ, and the Spirit of Christ is in us. One commentator put it this way, "The stunning reality of discipleship, brought through the gift of the Spirit, is that we share a like intimacy with the Godhead as Christ does with God."

Don't misunderstand what I'm saying. We are not God, but we are intimately connected to God through the Spirit. Jesus spells this out more clearly in John, chapter 15 when he uses a familiar analogy. In that analogy, the Father is the vine grower, Jesus is the vine, and Jesus' disciples are the branches. There is this connection between the Father, the Son and us.

## THE SPIRIT AND WORKS

And how is this connection maintained? How do we know that we are connected to the vine, to Jesus? We bear fruit.

Spirituality begins when we do works that are modeled after the life of Jesus. The Spirit we seek is not just any Spirit. He is the Spirit of Christ. And this connection with God, this life in the Spirit begins with works. Spirituality begins when we do something.

Do you want to feel more spiritual? Do something. Attempt something bold for the Lord. Claim the promise that he is with you and will help you to do great things. Christianity is not and will never be a spectator sport!

Unfortunately, I have found that the trend in recent years has been to do just that, to make Christianity into a spectator sport. Worship has become an entertainment, and there are many whose connection to the church is tenuous at best. The modern search for meaning, for a sense of the spiritual has been derailed by our misunderstanding at this point.

You might be shocked to hear this, but spirituality is not primarily about prayer and Bible study. Certainly those disciplines are important and necessary. But, sometimes we stop with prayer and Bible study. We think of these activities as the be all and end all of what it means to be spiritual.

But, they are just the beginning. Through prayer and Bible study we learn who God is and what God wants us to do, but learning will do us no good unless we put it into practice. Reading the Bible without putting it into practice is like reading the instruction manual for a tool and never actually using the tool. It's a waste of time.

Spirituality, this connection with God through the Spirit comes when we do what faith requires. The life of the Spirit, according to verse 15 of our lesson for today is marked by showing our love for God by keeping the commandments of Jesus.

Jesus makes this point over and over again because he knows that this is where we are likely to miss the boat. Down through the years many Christians have associated spirituality with mystical practices, secret knowledge and unique experiences. They have cloistered themselves away from the world in an attempt to be more spiritual.

But, as it turns out, life in the Spirit is about something much more practical. Life in the Spirit is about being empowered to do God's Will here and now. Life in the Spirit is faith in action.

## DO WHAT FAITH REQUIRES

Dietrich Bonhoeffer told of church members who would come into his office for pastoral care. Their complaint was a lack of faith. They didn't (as we might put it today) "feel the Spirit" any more.

Instead of trying to bolster their faith through prescribing Bible verses and spiritual practices, Bonhoeffer would suggest that they do something. He would ask, "Is there something that you need to do? Is there a person whom you need to forgive? Have you been unfaithful in some important duty? Do what you need to do. Forgive those who need to be forgiven. Do what faith requires and you may find that you will have faith."

This is one of the guiding principles for my own life. When I start feeling alone and unhappy and “unspiritual”, I ask myself this question, “What do I need to do?”

The answer soon presents itself, and as I do what faith requires then I am aware of the Spirit. Then I am aware of that Helper who lifts me up, comforts me, strengthens my faith, and enables me to do what I thought I could not do.

When we go back to that first account of the coming of the Spirit in the book of Acts, we see that the greatest miracle, the miracle that really formed the church and attracted many people to it was not the fantastic signs ... the rushing wind and the miraculous speaking in tongues. Those signs could have been easily discounted as a freak of nature or the babbling of overly enthusiastic (even inebriated) disciples. Indeed, some made that very charge from the beginning. (Acts 2:13)

But, what they couldn't discount was the change in the lives of these disciples who were called by the Spirit. They lived in a different way. They loved each other. They spent time with one another. And they shared what they had with those who were in need. (Acts 2:44-47)

The important point is that these new disciples voluntarily shared what they had with others. It wasn't communism where sharing was required. It was a voluntary sharing of lives and material goods with the people of the church. And it was this sharing that earned them the goodwill of the people. Many joined that early church because they wanted to be a part of a group that was willing to share.

## HOW SHARING CHANGES THINGS

Let me tell you about something exciting that happened to me this week. Our usual custodian is out of town on vacation, and he was replaced by a young Brazilian man and his wife who really did a great job cleaning our church.

This young man also recently started coming to the Brazilian fellowship that meets at our church and has found this to be a wonderful place for him to grow as a Christian.

He enthusiastically told me why he first came to this fellowship. It was because of our church sign. Many of you may have noticed that our church sign talks about services for English, Spanish and Brazilian.

He said that he saw that sign and said to himself, "Wow, here is a church that is willing to share with people who are different from themselves. Not only do they have services in Spanish, they also have services for people like me from Brazil. This is wonderful."

I wish you could have seen the joy on his face. Our willingness to share has made a big difference in his life and in the life of his family. I could feel the Spirit working in the life of this man and in the life of our church.

Obviously, the thing that we need to do is to learn how to recognize the work of the Spirit when we see it and participate in that work.

Notice that when the Spirit descended on that first Pentecost, the Spirit descended upon peoples from all over the world. (Acts 2:5-12) I think that's significant. The work of the Spirit from the very beginning was an international work. Our connection with the Spirit brings us into contact with the world.

A lady from the First Presbyterian Church of Daytona beach asked us to pray for immigration reform at our last Committee on Ministry meeting. She said that there was a time when she wouldn't even have cared about such a thing.

But, her church had become vitally involved in ministering to the needs of the Hungarian immigrant community in that area. She had learned to know and love some of these people. And so now she prays for them in their difficult struggle to immigrate to the United States.

The Spirit is at work in Daytona Beach.

## NOT THE WAY OF THE WORLD

This is certainly not the way the world thinks about things. All over the world polarizing religious leaders are blaming other peoples and nations for their problems. Instead of trying to cooperate and help each other, there has been a trend to divide and conquer. Instead of emphasizing what we have in common there has been a rush to highlight those areas of difference.

Our lesson for today teaches us that the way of life promoted by the Spirit will not be understood nor accepted by the world. (John 14:17) We will be rejected and dismissed by the powers that be when we seek to embrace all people and share our lives with them. They will see our approach as naïve and even dangerous.

But, I believe that the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and empowered by the Spirit is stronger than any other power on earth. Indeed, that Spirit is the very power of a Creator God. It is the Spirit that hovered over the waters of creation, and it is that same Spirit that helps us be who we are called to be in Christ Jesus.

You might find it hard to believe that God's Spirit can reside in your heart. You may find it hard to believe that you could have such an intimate connection with God. But, I think the praise and worship song has it right. God is Lord of creation and Lord of our hearts.

## AN EXPERIMENT IN FAITH

This week I challenge you to try an experiment. I want you to do something. I want you to do what faith requires.

I want you to forgive someone or help someone or encourage someone or spend time with someone. I want you to do that work for someone else that you have been putting off for a long time. I want you to show an act of kindness toward that person who is different from you in some significant way. Be aware that even the most casual contact can be an opportunity for the working of God's Spirit.

I believe that if you do that your life will become more spiritual. You will begin to sense a connection not only with the person you help but also with the Lord. You will know what it means to be filled with the Spirit.

Tony Campolo told of waiting to be picked up at the airport. He happened to notice an elderly woman who looked very unhappy. In fact, he said that she looked right down mean. Tony decided to make it his mission to cheer her up.

He started talking to her and joking with her. It took a while but she finally began to laugh ... a lot. In fact, he said that he thought she was going to pass out before it was all over.

Finally, a friend came to pick up this lady. They hugged and got into the car. About a half hour later the car containing the elderly lady came back to the airport. The lady got out of the car, walked up to Tony and said,

“Mister, you couldn’t have possibly known this, but it was three years ago today that my husband of 54 years died. I didn’t realize it until I was halfway home today. But, this was the first day that I was able to laugh. I wanted to come back and thank you.”

May God help us not only be hearers of the word but also doers of the word. Amen.

**[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)**

Carrollyn & Frank Allen

[carrollynandfrank@earthlink.net](mailto:carrollynandfrank@earthlink.net)

