

Seeking The Spirit

John 15:26-16:15, Acts 2:1-21

May 27, 2012

I.

This is a busy weekend. All across America we celebrate our heritage of freedom, as we did yesterday in Diamondhead. With flags, bands, picnics, and parades we pay homage to the men and women who gave their lives to preserve that freedom.

And in the church it's the Day of Pentecost, the birthday of the church, when we celebrate the Holy Spirit coming into the world to carry on the work that Jesus began.

So, our processional and recessional hymns remember Memorial Day, while our readings and worship honor God's gift of his Spirit in our lives.

And, of course, Pentecost is central to the church. This was a real event in history when the Spirit spectacularly appeared to unite Jesus' followers into a community of faith that rapidly would grow into the worldwide Christian church.

But the Holy Spirit also works in our lives individually, as well as in the church, to show us God's will and guide us in making decisions.

II.

And we all find ourselves making decisions, don't we? Sometimes they're small ones; sometimes they are significant. They might affect others, or just ourselves. So how do we make these decisions? And do we really have any choices, or is everything predestined?

After all, most of us have heard for a long time that God has a plan for our lives. If that literally is true, wouldn't it seem that God's plan would have priority over our meager efforts to make plans for ourselves?

This brings up two important points. First, we should correctly understand the theological proposition about what God has planned. Contrary to some popular belief, God does not have a plan for our lives. God has *many* plans for us. It is plural, not singular.

The prophet Jeremiah said, "I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart" (29:11-13).

This lead to the second point. The Bible confirms we have free will. God spoke through Moses and told the Hebrews if they obeyed God's laws they would be blessed, but if not they would be cursed (Deut. 30:15). Thus, they had choices. The Old Testament has many other examples.

And Jesus later spoke of the need to keep his commandments (Jn. 14:15, 23). This implied the option to do otherwise. The New Testament frequently states that we have choices, and those choices have consequences (Mt. 16:27, Ro. 2:6, 1 Cor. 3:10-15, 2 Cor. 5:10, Gal. 6:8).

So, how does this work? God has plans for us, but we also have free will. The two ideas are not in conflict. I believe God's plans for us are entirely consistent with exercising our own free will.

Suppose, for example, we are faced with a choice between doing either X or Y. If we choose to do X, the result might be God's Plan A. But if we decide instead to do Y, then God's Plan B might happen. Or maybe Plan A is the default plan, which is what we get if we do nothing. But if we do something more, like pray, we get Plan B, which could be better.

And perhaps there is Plan C, Plan D, and so on. Perhaps for some choices God is neutral or has not stepped into events in this broken world. God is capable of all that.

But the point is that insofar as it is up to us when we have choices to make, we always get one of God's plans. And which plan it is could depend upon what we do.

Now I realize that at times things happen beyond our control, and we ask God why. We don't understand. Sometimes life does not give us a choice. That is another sermon at another time.

For today, however, I go back to my earlier question. How do we make decisions when we have decisions to make? How can we know which plans God really wants for us? There really is only one answer. We rely upon the Holy Spirit to lead us in the paths God wants us to take.

III.

Let me repeat that. We rely on the Holy Spirit to show us God's will. And the Spirit is not hard to find. We have the Holy Spirit within us now. The Spirit entered us when we were baptized, and was sealed within us forever. But that alone is not sufficient. The Spirit must awaken within us, animate us, and show forth through us.

Some examples might illustrate this point about a passive and active Spirit. After we drink a glass of water the water is inside us, but we probably don't feel it. However, if we're in a pool or the ocean then the water surrounds us, and we can feel the sensation of being completely wet.

Or it might be like buying a software program. We can install it on the computer and it is there. But it doesn't do us any good until we enter the product code and activate it.

We also could consider the analogy of flames in today's reading. The Spirit enters us like an ember at baptism. But that ember does not mean that we have faith or are saved.

It takes something more; something divine and exceptional. To use these examples, just as we jump in the water, we become soaked in the Spirit. Just as we activate our software, the Spirit starts up within us. Just as an ember bursts into flames, the Spirit is ignited in our lives.

And that can happen through prayer, reading the Bible, living in a community of faith, trusting in Jesus Christ, and seeking the Holy Spirit. That was the result of Pentecost. Jesus' followers came alive with the divine power he had on earth, the church was born, and real people found themselves in real relationships with God.

IV.

And having a relationship with God leads me to speak a little about our 40 Days in the Word program that soon will begin in the church. I believe it's important to understand what the course is, and is not, designed to do.

There's a story that shows how things might not be what they appear. A salesman had a meeting with a customer the next day, and that night set his alarm for 6:00 am to allow enough time.

But he woke up five minutes early, and saw the clock said 5:55. That was close enough, so he got up and turned on the television just in time to hear the station identify itself as channel five. And then he looked at his calendar and saw the date was May 5.

Then he left for his meeting, which was at a company named Five Star Industries, and its address was 555 5th Street. And when he arrived he saw that its offices were on the 5th floor.

So he met with his customer, who placed a five hundred thousand dollar order. Then, as he left the building he saw a coffee shop called "The Five Minute Break." So he went in and sat down, and noticed newspaper on the table. It was open to the racing form on the sports page.

And his eye just happened to catch the fact that a horse named "Five Spot" was running in the fifth race at the local track, and the odds were 5:1. Well, this was more than he could resist. He quickly left the coffee shop, caught a cab for the track, ran up to the \$50 window, and bet \$500.

Wouldn't you know that he got to his seat five minutes before post time, the race was run, and Five Spot finished—fifth!

The point of this story is that sometimes we don't have all the information that we need. And in talking with people here in the church, that might to be a possibility for a few of us with our 40 Days in the Word course. I have heard concerns that the course might reflect a theological approach that does not appeal to them.

That might be because Rick Warren, the designer of the course, is an outspoken pastor. But he also embraces the Bible and traditional values. And this course, 40 Days in the Word, is different from his earlier course, The Purpose Driven Life, which had both supporters and critics.

This 40 Days in the Word course recognizes that the Bible is a big and challenging book. It can be daunting. Where and how do we start and be able to continue? That's what this course is about. It does not try to change our theology, but rather gives us tools to support our theology.

Specifically, it is a six week program where small groups learn different approaches to studying the Bible, and members of each group select a project to help the church or community. The idea is to engage the Bible in ways that last beyond the course by learning and doing the Word.

Week One uses what the authors call the "Pronounce It" approach. Saying a passage by focusing on different words can help unlock its meanings. Week Two uses a "Picture It" approach. Visualizing scripture puts ourselves in the picture. Week Three uses a "Probe It" approach. Learning to ask specific predetermined questions can lead to deeper understandings of passages.

Then Week Four uses a "Paraphrase It" approach. Putting the Bible in our own words can help show how it applies to us. Week Five uses a "Personalize It! Pray It!" approach. It explains how reading a passage in the first person singular can help us use it as a prayer. And Week Six goes into principles of Bible interpretation.

And so the course does not offer new theologies, but rather new ways to read and understand. It is intended to give us greater confidence as we engage the Bible, which in turn will lead to spiritual growth and a deepening of our faith. I urge us to consider participating.

V.

Now, back to Pentecost. Whether you can participate in the 40 Days course or not, we still are called to trust the Holy Spirit, whose work we celebrate today, and whose presence can help us know what God wants for us.

In some ways the Holy Spirit is like a cell phone tower. The further we are away from the tower, the worse the reception. The closer to the tower, the better the reception. If we do our best to place ourselves close to our Lord, the Spirit will ensure that our calls go through.

And so the Holy Spirit is more than some vague and undefined presence that roams around the Book of Common Prayer on Sunday mornings. The Spirit continues in our lives as the revelation of God, and only with the Spirit's help can we truly know the Lord. *Amen.*