

Friends with the Spirit  
Acts 2:1–21; Galatians 5:16–26  
Sunday, June 5, 2022 (Pentecost)

Let us pray: Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us. Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us. Spirit of the living God, in the hearing of your word, fall afresh on us. Amen.

Last week we talked about Christ's ascension and the presence of God in Jesus Christ leaving this world. But before he ascended, Jesus told his disciples, "I will not leave you orphaned or abandoned. God will send the Holy Spirit to be my presence with you after I am gone." And today we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, God's presence with us today.

Author Phyllis Tickle talks about the history of our faith as having three ages. There is the Age of the Father, in which human beings related to God primarily as God the Father, the creator of heaven and earth. This was from the beginning until the time of Christ. Then came the Age of the Son, when God's presence took on flesh and blood and walked the earth in the person of Jesus Christ, and we primarily related to God in terms of the Son, the Word of God, both in the *flesh* and in *scripture*. And then, finally, Tickle says, we are now living in the Age of the Spirit, where we primarily relate to God in terms of the Holy Spirit. And therein lies the problem.

We *know* how to relate to God as *Father*, God as *creator*. We can look around us and see the evidence of that. We *know* how to relate to God as *Son*, both in the person of Jesus Christ and in the written Word of God in scripture. It is a whole lot harder to relate to God in terms of *Spirit*. Spirit is not *physical*, it is not *tangible*, not something we can *see or touch or hear*. A lot of us today do not know how to relate to God in terms of Spirit.

Pastor and author Rich Villodas says that the church often has three postures as it relates to the Holy Spirit: we have either (1) *forgotten* the Spirit, we never talk about the Holy Spirit or think about the Spirit, it never occurs to us that the Spirit is a part of our everyday lives and faith, (2) we are *frightened* of the Spirit, we *remember* it, we know it's there, but we don't quite know what to *do* with it, it's not something we can order or control, so we just stay away from it, (3) or we are *forceful* with the Spirit, as some charismatic faith traditions insist that you are not a "real Christian" unless you have been baptized with the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues, and there becomes a real *pressure* to be "in the Spirit."

So we have either *forgotten* the Spirit, we're *frightened* of the Spirit, or we are *forceful* with the Spirit, and I think that what happens in a lot of Mainline Protestant churches like the Presbyterian Church is that we fluctuate somewhere between *forgetting* the Spirit and *fearing* the Spirit, and the Holy Spirit becomes the most *overlooked* or *neglected* person of the Trinity. But we *need* the Holy Spirit. We are living in the Age of the Spirit, a time in which we primarily relate to God through the Holy Spirit; that if we want to have a connection with God, a relationship with God, we must have a relationship with the Holy Spirit.

What Rich Villodas says we are invited to is *forgetting* or *fear* or *force*, but *friendship* with the Holy Spirit – a friendship that forms the character of Jesus Christ in us. What does *that* look like? What does it look like for us to be *friends* with the Spirit? To be *filled* with the Holy Spirit, as we read that Jesus' disciples were on that first Pentecost? How do we relate to someone that we cannot *see* or *touch* or *hear*?

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Paul, in writing to the Christians in Galatia, contrasts the *Spirit* with the *flesh*. He says, "Live by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the

Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh.” So there is the *Spirit* and there is *flesh*. Now, we have to be careful here, because that word *flesh* has developed certain connotations for us. It has been taken to mean that anything *physical* or *material* is *sinful* or *bad* – that our *bodies* are sinful and bad – and so the goal of our faith is to shed the flesh, to forsake this physical, material world and life, to place more importance on *spirit* than *body*. And over the centuries, that has led us to some very harmful places.

But what Paul is talking about here when he talks about the flesh is not the sinfulness of our bodies. When he talks about *flesh* – the Greek word is *sarx* – he’s talking more about how we orient our lives. Do we orient our lives to the things of this world or to the things of God? To the flesh or to the Spirit? It’s like talking about the kingdom of man as opposed to the Kingdom of God. How are our lives oriented? Where is our *hope* placed?

New Testament scholar Charlie Cousar says it this way, “Paul is not saying that material things are inherently evil, nor is he implying that human feelings, physical desires, or sensual pleasures are themselves to be avoided or suppressed. What makes the flesh so destructive is that it can become the norm by which people’s lives are lived. This world, with its measures of success and its rewards for hard work, absorbs all their interests and demands their full attention. There is no openness to God’s activity, to the presence of the Spirit, to the life of the new age. The sum of things consists of what can be seen, handled, tasted – or bought...*Sarx* is this historical, natural, earthly sphere from which people deceive themselves into thinking that they can derive ultimate meaning.”<sup>1</sup> Where is the *meaning* of our lives found – in the things of this world or in the things of God?

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Cousar, *Galatians (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*, pg. 137–138.

So Paul draws this distinction between a life lived according to the flesh, to the things of this world, and a life lived according to the Spirit, a life that is oriented to God. And what he says here is that “the works of the flesh are obvious.” That Greek word for *obvious* is *phanera*, which more literally means, “to be made manifest or visible.”

Think about it this way: if I ask you what *sinfulness* or *evil* looks like, evil is not something physical or tangible that we can put under a microscope and examine. But evil is made *manifest*, it is made *visible* in our *actions*. You can look at something that someone *does* and say, “That is sinful or that is evil.” (Be *careful* with that, but you can do it.) Paul says that the *works of the flesh*, a life lived according to the things of this world, is made manifest and visible and tangible in things like fornication, idolatry, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, and things like this.

By contrast, he says, a life lived according to the Spirit is made manifest and visible and tangible in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Spirit is not something that we can *see* or *touch* or *hear*, but it is made *visible* and *manifest* in our *actions*. You can look at something that someone *does* and say, “That is the Spirit at work.”

So what does it look like to be filled with the Spirit, to be *friends* with the Spirit and *relate* to the Holy Spirit in a way that forms us in the character and likeness of Jesus Christ? It looks like *love* and *joy* and *peace* and *patience* and *kindness* and *generosity* and *faithfulness* and *gentleness* and *self-control*. If we have opened our lives to God and oriented our lives to the Divine, then these are the things that the Spirit will make manifest in us. We can’t *see* or *hear* or *touch* the Spirit, but we can *see* and *hear* and *touch* the things that the Spirit of God does *in* and *through* us. *Those* are tangible.

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Now, again, we have to be careful here, because this list that Paul gives us – I don't know about you, but I *like* lists; lists help me get things done – this list of the fruit of the Spirit is not a *to do list*. It is not a checklist of things that we have to strive to *be* or *do* in order to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Because, let's be honest, if left to my own devices, I would probably not by nature be patient or kind or generous. And all I have to do to *see* that is look at what I was like as a child, and I was not *any* of those things.

But what Paul is doing here is *not* saying, “If you work really hard to do these things, *then* you will be friends with the Spirit, living according to the Spirit.” What he's saying is, “If you open yourself up to the presence and power of God, then you will be friends with the Spirit, living according to the Spirit, you will be *guided* by the Spirit, and you will do these things.” The disciples didn't *do* anything on that first Pentecost to *make* the Holy Spirit come. The Spirit just *came*. They were simply *open* to the presence and power of God, to friendship with the Spirit as they had friendship with Jesus.

Again, Charlie Cousar says it this way, “To walk by the Spirit entails a genuine decision, but not a decision involving a strong effort of the will to overcome enormous obstacles in order to get something accomplished. Rather, Christians are called to entrust themselves to the Spirit, to God's activity, and simply follow his guidance...Paul's language suggests not human activities to accomplish extraordinary feats which then might be acceptable to God, but a simple openness to God's power to redeem and transform.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Pg. 138–139

It's not about how hard we work and try to bear the fruit of the Spirit. It's about what God does *in* and *through* us to grow this fruit.

Apart from the Spirit of God, we can do nothing. But if we open our lives to God's Holy Spirit in a genuine desire to be *friends* with the Spirit, to walk with the Spirit of God, step by step through our daily lives, then God will *help us* to be loving and joyful and peaceful and patient and kind and generous and faithful and gentle and to have self-control. These are the things that God *wants* to do in us, *wants* to make manifest in our lives. These are the things that God wants *more of* in the world. And God wants to walk with us, as friends walk side by side, to fill God's good creation with the abundance of this fruit.

Are you open to friendship with the Spirit? To walking through life with God's Holy Spirit as you would walk with a friend? Don't think of the Holy Spirit as a *thing* that connects us to God. Think of the Holy Spirit as a person that you can be friends with. And if you *want* to open yourself up to that friendship, then it starts by simply *asking*. Simply saying to God, "I want to experience friendship with you. I want to walk with you through life. I want to open my life to your presence and power. I want to know love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and generosity and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control. Lord, grow this fruit in me." Just ask. Make that simple request your daily prayer. Read this list of the fruit of the Spirit each day and say, "Lord, grow this fruit in me." And in the act of *asking* and *opening*, you will find yourself *becoming*, not just friends with the *Spirit*, but friends with those *around you*. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.