

“Get Your Heart Right”

The Rev. Drew Willard  
UCC at The Villages, FL  
January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016  
*1<sup>st</sup> Sun. after Epiphany*

Acts 8:14-24

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

*Peter and John went down to Samaria*

*where they prayed that the new believers would receive the Holy Spirit.*

*(This was because the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen on any of them;  
they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.)*

*Acts 8:15-16*

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to get our hearts right to be open to your Holy Spirit.

Help us to be discerning of your will – your love for us.

Help us to remember you are our refuge of strength and a very present help always.

Amen

This passed couple weeks, Jo & I have been settling in to our new home  
and there are still boxes of things in rooms and the hallway  
to be sorted through.

It's been a bittersweet process of deciding what to keep and what to throw away –  
even what to burn.

Slowly, but surely, though, these boxes are breaking down and seem to melt away,  
though it is still hard just to get around in one room I plan to use as my study.

The boxes are filled with books mostly, but letters and pictures, too –  
memories good and bad, happy and sad,  
all reminding me of my journey of faith, so far...

A few years ago, it was reported that Mother Teresa had written letters revealing  
that she had profound ‘periods of doubt about God’ and

that she was personally ‘tormented’ about her apparent lack of faith.

She wrote the following in 1979 to a clergyman,

*"Jesus has a very special love for you.*

*As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great*

*that I look and do not see, listen and do not hear."*

Even so – by the way, Mother Teresa is being considered for sainthood

in the Roman Catholic Church with a possible decision this September.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-teresa-letters-idUSN2435506020070824>

Far from disconcerting, I find Mother Teresa's struggle to be very hopeful

for the rest of us as we may wonder where we are on that journey to eternal life.

Apparently, it doesn't matter *who* we are, we can all have our doubts –

and still be on that road to glory.

Willard, p.2

I believe examples of people who struggle with their faith helps to free us all from feeling we have to have a dramatic vision like the one Jesus had as he emerged from the waters of his baptism with the heavens torn open and the Holy Spirit descending to alight upon him like a dove.

Far be it from me to say, however, that we should *not* expect such visions from occurring.

The Holy Spirit figures significantly in Jesus' life – like when he quoted Isaiah at synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth.

In the Gospel of Luke chapter 4, Jesus acknowledged that, 'the Spirit was upon [him] to preach good news to the poor'.

In the first chapter of Luke, we have the Advent story of how the Angel Gabriel came to tell Mary she was chosen to become the mother of the Son of God.

Again, this comes about through the action of the Holy Spirit, alighting upon Mary and allowing the creative 'power of the Most High' God to work through her.

The "birth of the Church" at Pentecost is likewise characterized by the action of the Spirit of God alighting upon the heads of the apostles as they proclaimed the Good News of Christ.

Even the very first chapter of Genesis speaks of the Spirit of God hovering like a bird over the watery chaos of Creation – looking for a place to land.

So, the Holy Spirit can be demonstrated in very dramatic ways – but not necessarily in the same way...

You can't bottle it and sell it – like what Simon Magus the magician thought he could do when he tried to purchase access to the Holy Spirit from the apostles Peter and John.

Peter was enraged and condemned him on the spot for his arrogance and ignorance, basically telling him that he just didn't get it – he didn't really have a clue what Church was about.

Peter did give him a way out when he said,

"Therefore, change your heart and life! Turn from your wickedness!  
Plead with the Lord in the hope that your wicked intent can be forgiven..."  
[Acts 8:22]

Simon Magus needed to turn his inner life around and turn away from his corrupt behavior, asking God to forgive and help him deal with his 'wicked intent'.

Then, Peter added this insight about Simon Magus:

"... for I see that your bitterness has poisoned you and evil has you in chains."  
[Acts 8:23]

Willard, p.3

Our actions spring from our thoughts – or our thoughtlessness,  
but the message here seems to be that we'll be judged  
not so much by our deeds as by the habit of our hearts.

Simon Magus appears to be genuinely horrified,  
but from history we are told he went on to become a real problem  
for the early Christian Church, organizing his own Gnostic sect  
with his wife Helen in the grand tradition of personality cults;  
To some extent, they were the Jim & Tammy Bakker of their day.

The Apostle Peter – who was also called Simon, was sure enough in this situation  
to legitimately judge –and counsel Simon Magus.

Remember that Peter had his doubts, too.

Though he had been a disciple who literally followed Jesus around  
and witnessed such remarkable events as the miraculous catch of fish,  
the feeding of the 5,000, walking on water, and the Transfiguration,  
yet Peter still faltered on the night of Jesus' arrest, by denying Jesus.

According to Christian legend, when his time had come,  
Peter still felt unworthy and insisted that he be crucified upside down.

Despite whatever doubts Peter continued to have about himself,  
he still had the capacity to discern between what was true and false.

Discernment is a defining characteristic of the Holy Spirit  
and this goes beyond simple feelings.

Like Peter and Mother Teresa, we are not perfect,  
but we can allow ourselves to be perfected.

A recent Stillspeaking devotional by Tony Robinson cited a quote  
by author Nadia Bolz Weber, the tattooed Lutheran pastor –or pastrix,  
who is all the rage these latter days.

She was asked about her 'spiritual practices, for getting closer to God' –  
and she answered,

*'Why would I want to get close to God? Whenever Jesus gets close to me  
I end up having to love someone I hate, give away more of my money,  
or forgive someone I don't want to forgive.'*

In other words, we don't have to go far to find God, because God seeks us out  
ready or not, whether we recognize God's presence or not.

[http://www.ucc.org/daily\\_devotional\\_nimby\\_alert](http://www.ucc.org/daily_devotional_nimby_alert)

What we have to do, is make room for God – make room for God's presence,  
whether we feel it or not, whether we see it or not.

We have to make room for what we believe even when we don't know –  
like entering a dark room filled with furniture and things we can't see.

The discernment of the Holy Spirit comes as a gift – even unrecognized,  
but we must make a conscious decision to be open to God's leading  
oftrn despite how we feel or what we see on the surface.

Willard, p.4

Making room for God – even when we can't feel God's presence  
is part of developing a mature relationship with God –  
and for us as Christians, that means a relationship  
with God through Christ, the Holy Spirit of love.

The Sermon on the Mount can help us here which specifically challenges us  
not to limit our faith to a transaction like Simon Magus was trying to do.  
To paraphrase what Jesus said in Matthew 6:1-8 ...

... WHENEVER YOU PRAY,  
DON'T BE LIKE THOSE HYPOCRITES WHO LOVE  
TO MAKE A BIG SHOW OF THEIR PRAYERS  
IN THE SYNAGOGUES AND PUBLIC PLACES FOR THE ATTENTION.  
I TELL YOU THE TRUTH,  
THEY HAVE ALL THE REWARD THEY WILL GET.  
BUT YOU CAN PRAY EVEN WHEN YOU ENTER AN EMPTY ROOM  
AND SHUT THE DOOR.  
SO, PRAY IN SOLITUDE  
FOR YOUR HEAVENLY GUARDIAN WILL SEE AND REWARD YOU.  
NOW IN YOUR PRAYERS,  
DON'T BABBLE ON AND ON LIKE EXTREMISTS DO.  
FOR THEY THINK THAT THEIR ELABORATE REQUESTS  
WILL BE HEARD.  
DON'T BE LIKE THEM,  
FOR YOUR HEAVENLY GUARDIAN KNOWS WHAT YOU NEED  
EVEN BEFORE YOU ASK...

God knows what we need even before we ask, and seeks us out –  
though we may not always recognize how.

Access to God's Holy Spirit is not something we can buy our way into,  
or presume we can control – when we do, the outward appearance is all we get.  
It's like how you can't make somebody love you –  
you can only make room in your own heart to love them.

God's Holy Spirit is about loving relationship and we access it by loving  
even when we don't feel like it.

By faith, we make room for God in our hearts and by faith we enter *that* room –  
though we may not always see what's in there  
and may have to empty a few boxes in the process.

When we stop looking for proof, when we stop trying to control the process,  
then God shows up and turns on the light.

Amen

*Our lesson from Acts 8:14-24 includes with the Apostle Peter's confrontation with Simon Magus – a magician who presumed he could purchase access to the Holy Spirit like the secret to a trick...*

[14] When word reached the apostles in Jerusalem that Samaria had accepted God's word, they commissioned Peter and John to go to Samaria.

[15] Peter and John went down to Samaria where they prayed that the new believers would receive the Holy Spirit.

[16] (This was because the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen on any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.)

[17] So Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

[18] When Simon [Magus] perceived that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money.

[19] He said,  
"Give me this authority too so that anyone on whom I lay my hands will receive the Holy Spirit."

[20] Peter responded,  
"May your money be condemned to hell along with you because you believed you could buy God's gift with money!

[21] You can have no part or share in God's word because your heart isn't right with God.

[22] Therefore, change your heart and life!  
Turn from your wickedness!

Plead with the Lord in the hope that your wicked intent can be forgiven,

[23] for I see that your bitterness has poisoned you and evil has you in chains."

[24] Simon replied,  
"All of you, please, plead to the Lord for me so that nothing of what you have said will happen to me!"

*Let us be challenged and guided by these words...*

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

[15] As the people were in expectation,  
and all... questioned in their hearts concerning John,  
whether perhaps he were the Christ,

[16] John answered them all,  
“I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming,  
the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie;  
he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

[17] His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor,  
and to gather the wheat into his granary,  
but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

[21] Now when all the people were baptized,  
and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying,  
the heaven was opened,

[22] and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove,  
and a voice came from heaven,  
“Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.”