

Spirit Gives (Principal Gift of) Faith for Common Good

-Today on Pentecost Sunday we celebrate how Jesus' disciples were gathered in Jerusalem when there came a sound like a rushing wind. How forked and fiery tongues appeared among them. How they were filled with the Holy Spirit. How they began to speak in tongues not their own, communicating in the heart languages of peoples from across the Mediterranean world. How by the power of the Spirit they shared the good news of Jesus's life for us unto death, the good news of his vindicating resurrection, and so the good news of his inauguration of the kingdom, the new commonwealth on earth as it is in heaven.

As a person, Jesus was limited physically to where he could be and go on any given day, limited in how long he could go without eating or sleeping, limited in who he could speak with or reach. But the Spirit of God whom Jesus had promised them – the Comforter, Counselor, *Spirit* of Christ invisible among them – could be present to all people, at all times, in all places.

So on Pentecost we who follow Christ celebrate the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, bringing disciples alive to bear witness to the resurrection and reign of Jesus. *The Holy Spirit whom we worship with the Father and the Son as the Third Person of the Trinity – Three in One and One in Three – the Holy Spirit is God invisible, among us and within us even now, to bring to completion all that Christ began.*

Today we're going to flash forward perhaps twenty years from the Pentecost of wind and fire. We're going to open once again this letter that Paul wrote to a young church in Corinth. There's something remarkably redemptive about the struggles our sisters and brothers faced in first-century Corinth, as the Spirit continues to speak to us through them. And in essence, the church in Corinth was struggling to *be* Christ's church. They were struggling to *be* the new community empowered by God's Spirit.

I am going to be reading from 1 Corinthians 12.1-7. It's the NRSV version. (Glad for you to follow in the Bible in rack in front of you or under your seat. Order of New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians...)

-12 Now concerning spiritual [things] brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be ignorant. ²You know that when you were gentiles [this is back before the world was upended, before you came to faith in Jesus, and such categories fell away] you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. ³Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.

Let's pray: *Lord, we ask that by the power of your Holy Spirit, we might receive today and again and again the gift of our faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

-Last week, Austin Graef and I signed Bibles for our high school graduates. It was an emotional experience for me, thinking of my own son's graduation in a couple weeks. I was writing in the Bibles of students whom we've watched grow up here. And I did pretty well with having something brief to say until I came to Cazden's Bible. Which kind of stopped me short. What do

you write in the Bible of your own son? What words of encouragement might continue to speak through times of difficulty, doubt and delight? So I was grateful Austin had already gotten there before me. He wrote four words to Caz that really said everything I wanted to say:

Remember who you are. //

-This young church in Corinth was struggling in so many ways. They were swimming against the strong current of their whole culture. As are we. And it's like Paul's writing to his own kids. Like he's sending a note of encouragement to stick in their Bible: *Don't forget the Spirit. Remember who you are.*

'Look,' he says. 'You're struggling. Conflict. Competition. Status-seeking. Sexual immorality. Disregard for one another. Drunkenness. Disorder in worship. You're taking one another to court?! You're posturing over who belongs to the 'truly in' group of believers?! You're puffing yourselves up over who has the most valuable spiritual gifts?! Over who *matters* the most?!

'These struggles?' says Paul. 'They look just like the *un*-Spiritual world. They look just like everyone else. I don't want you to ignore the gift that's been poured into your hearts! I don't want you to misunderstand the power of the Spirit of God dwelling within you. I don't want you to forget what it means to belong to Jesus.'

So he reminds them of what the Lord has done in them. Of the gospel. Of the gift of the Spirit. He writes: ² You know that when you were gentiles [before you came to faith in Jesus] you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak.

He's saying: 'Recall how were exhausting yourselves in the service of false gods: Sacrificing to lumps of metal, stone and wood. Bowing to things less than God. Placating objects of superstition out of fear and habit. Working yourselves up to a fervor, a thrill, an ecstasy. Looking for a religious experience. But these gods that you chased after were mute. They had nothing to say to your life. No flaming tongue to proclaim good news. No word of living hope poured into your heart.'

Jerry Sittser taught us that the Roman empire embraced every foreign god. They pulled every idol into the Pantheon to placate it. But here's the thing. When everything is true, *nothing* is true. And when *nothing* is true, what rises to the top is the *status quo*. Because there's no preeminent authority to challenge it. There's no Truth that stands superior. So the status quo holds sway. And with the status quo, with the way of the world, What matters most is Me. Looking Out for Number One. Pleasure. Power. Popularity. Dog-Eat-Dog.

And as Austin captured it so clearly last week, 'making Me what matters most' rather than 'making Christ what matters most' – it's like biting into a plastic apple when you could taste the real one.

'So remember,' writes Paul, '*that* worldly emptiness is the way things were *before*, back when you identified merely as gentiles, back when you were carried away by false gods. But

everything has changed. *Don't forget the Spirit. Remember who you are.* In Christ you've been made new.

My friend Chris helped me think about what it means for you and me to bow to idols. He suggests that every identity we place ahead of our belonging to Jesus Christ is a false god. That our idols can often be readily exposed by the identities we embrace (even and often especially the ones that receive approval from our peers): Wealthy. Athletic. Popular. Failure. Strong. Attractive. Damaged. Smart. Wise. White. Straight. Professional. Funny. Addicted. Adventurous. Democrat. Educated. Married. Presbyterian. Skeptic. American. Even Mother.

Some identities are false: like 'hopeless,' or 'loner,' or 'in control.' Some identities are merely meant to be secondary: like 'student' or 'father,' or even 'Christian.' But every identity we place *before* our identity in Christ is an idol. And every time we break the commandment to love God first, we also break the commandment to love our neighbors. Hence, every failure of discipleship in the church at Corinth or the church at Missoula is in some means an act of idolatry. Of putting another identity first.

It made me wonder. Is there an identity you and I are tempted to embrace that throws our allegiance out of whack? Is there a sense of self in you or me that should be secondary, but that we've succumbed to the temptation to place first?

Friends, says Paul, speaking not only to the Corinthian church, but down through the ages, 'Don't forget the power of God's Spirit alive within you! *Remember who you are.*'

³... I want you to understand [he writes] that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and *no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.*

He puts it simply. It is the *Spirit's* work to fill us with faith for the journey. It is by the Spirit that put our trust in Jesus, that we find in him our primary identity. The Holy Spirit, the giver of life, draws us to our true Lord. We need faith more than oxygen. And the Spirit breathes into us faith in Jesus.

By contrast, any spirit at work within us that diminishes or rejects Jesus carries us away to a false identity, a false self, gasping for the air we need to live. To stray from the Spirit is to forget who we truly are.

And what is it that the Spirit inspires in us? The oldest, simplest affirmation of the Christ follower:

Jesus is Lord.

You might think of seminary as a peaceful place of prayer, study and rich fellowship. But for me seminary was also a disruption and reappraisal of everything I had come to hope. And so during my years of taking classes that removed me from my Christian community and took my Bible apart – as I walked through difficulty and doubt as well as delight – I kept a 3x5 index card in my desk drawer that said only this: 'Simple theology: Jesus is Lord.'

To affirm that *Jesus* is Lord is to claim that our God was born in *person* into the limited humanity, into the culture, into the religious and political history of first century Palestine as a Jewish man whose human heart was broken by divine love. That in this man Jesus, God is *personal*.

To affirm that Jesus *is* Lord is to claim that Jesus is not only some historical figure, not merely a manifestation of God's grace and truth to his Jewish disciples, but that Jesus is for us and with us now. That in this man Jesus, God is not only personal, but *present*.

To affirm that Jesus is *Lord* is to claim not only that the One revealed to Moses at the burning bush, the One whose name was considered too sacred to say aloud, that the G-d of Israel has *become* Jesus Christ and that He, not Caesar; that He, not the powers of the earthly or spiritual realm; that He has resurrected, ascended, and reigns, superseding all powers, demanding all allegiance. That in this man Jesus, God is not only personal and present, but *preeminent*.

Paul wishes to reawaken simple theology in those who would be Christ's Church. Jesus is Lord. Personal, present, preeminent. Our primary identity.

Three words that follow the four Austin wrote in Cazden's Bible for times of difficulty, doubt and delight: Remember who you are. Jesus is Lord.

-I've told you about my professor of Old Testament, Patrick Miller. As his children walked out the door with the keys on any given Friday or Saturday night, he told us he'd always cry out: 'Remember, you're a Miller.' And what was he after? He was a Dad encouraging his children to recall their family's faith, hope and love and choose to be their better selves.

What difficulties are we navigating? What doubt?

Often it is our sorrows that the Spirit uses to nudge us toward our central faith in Christ.

What if the Holy Spirit wants to remind you who you are today? To empower you to hold on to your faith in Jesus?

Let's take a moment and share, if you wish, out loud.

How is the Spirit at work in your life, our life? Or What is the Word of the Spirit you hear today?