

June 22, 2014

The National Presbyterian Church

## **The Force Transforming You**

1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Galatians 5:16-26; Romans 8:12-17

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This morning we come to the end of a series of sermons which we have been following since Easter in which we have been thinking together about the presence of the living risen Jesus Christ within our lives.

- Sometimes we call this presence of the living Christ within our lives the Holy Spirit.
- Sometimes, in old English, we call this presence the Holy “Ghost” (we meet that wording in the Apostles’ Creed and in the King James Version of the Bible).
- Sometimes we call this presence the Spirit of God or the Spirit of Christ or the Spirit of Holiness.

All of these names are interchangeable in the pages of Holy Scripture and they all point to the existential presence of the man Jesus of Nazareth after his death, resurrection and ascension, coming to his disciples, to be experienced forever within their lives just as he was experienced when he lived in flesh and blood in their midst, walking beside them, talking with them, instructing them, and empowering them to become people they never thought they could become without his help. Those first followers of Christ believed that even though they could not see him, yet, by the Spirit, Jesus Christ was a presence with them every moment of every day, and would be a presence with every one of his followers, including you and me, for every generation to come.

So this is what we’ve been thinking about in recent weeks: the experience of the Holy Spirit, the experience of the living risen Jesus Christ – and we’ve been doing so both through the lens of the teaching of our Lord Jesus (especially in the gospel of John in the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> Chapter) as well as through the lens of the early Christian church. A couple of weeks ago, for example, we looked at the very first experience of the Holy Spirit in the early church – the post resurrection, post ascension, presence of the resurrected Jesus Christ. The day was the day of Pentecost, 50 days after the first Easter, and Jesus’ followers were all together in the city of Jerusalem. We’re told in the Bible in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of The Acts of the Apostles that these disciples were all together in one place when all of a sudden something began to happen.

First, there was a noise. It wasn’t a boom box booming out from next door, but it was just as distracting! The noise was like the sound of a strong wind: and wind, as those disciples would have known, was the first description of God in the pages of scripture (go back to the opening chapter of Genesis and the presence of God’s Spirit is likened to the wind). So within this sound was a sign that God was present.

And then, second, there was something visual: there were “tongues as of fire” on their heads – and “fire” in the story of the escape of the people of Israel from slavery was a symbol of God’s presence traveling with the people (Exodus 13:21 – “a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night”). Two (audio/visual!) signs of the presence of God.

And then, third, their tongues began to move and the followers of Jesus began to speak in other languages, languages that other people could understand. Many people were in Jerusalem at that time for a great festival – the Festival of Weeks, sometimes called the Festival of Pentecost. They were there from all over the Mediterranean world, all over the Middle East, and they spoke multiple languages – and yet they said “we can hear everybody speaking in our own language” (Acts 2:11).

What went on in that room was so unusual and remarkable that it overflowed to the world around, making people ask “what in the world is going on?” And Simon Peter, Jesus’ closest friend who just a few weeks before had been a coward denying that he ever knew Jesus, and running away from him, stood up to preach in front of this intrigued crowd, and began to explain to them what was going on – that this was the coming of the Holy Spirit, the coming of the living resurrected Jesus into their lives, as promised in the biblical book of Joel (2:28). He began to speak to the crowd about the life of Jesus and the death of Jesus. He brazenly blamed the crowd for the death of Jesus, and then spoke to them about the resurrection of Jesus before calling them to repent – as if to say: “because of what God has done for you in this man’s life, change your way of life. Give your life to him.” And that day, three thousand people in that crowd did precisely that. Their lives were changed and the church was born.

Those twelve disciples, down to eleven disciples without Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus, growing to about 120 close followers (Acts 1:15), all of a sudden became a large community of three thousand people (Acts 2:41) because of the spectacular presence of the Holy Spirit on that day – the spectacular presence of the living resurrected Jesus – on the day the church was born.

It was a wonderful, remarkable occasion, perhaps even a necessary occasion. I mean those followers of Jesus were uneducated. They were Galileans. They were backwater country people. If we had been from Jerusalem we would have called them the equivalent of “rednecks”! The educated, sophisticates of Jerusalem would never have listened to them at all, I would suspect, if something remarkable had not happened. But people *did* listen; something remarkable *did* happen, and it was wonderful. And yet it was also problematic. It really was problematic.

You see, there were some Christians from that day on who began to assume that this spectacular experience of the presence of the Risen Jesus Christ would be the normal experience of the Risen Jesus Christ, from that day onward. Or let me put it like this: *if the first evidence that God had come in the power of the Holy Spirit on the day when the church was born was the appearance of spectacular signs and wonders and marvelous things, why would it not be the case that if the Holy Spirit came to other Christians at other times the evidence for that coming*

would not be exactly the same? – mighty wind, tongues of fire, the ability to speak in other languages and so forth?

And this became problematic in the early church because not everybody had experiences like this and the question was whether or not they were experiencing the same spirit, the same Holy Spirit, the same resurrected Jesus, as those disciples experienced on that first day in which the church was born. Indeed, this became especially problematic, we know specifically, in the life of a church in southern Greece in a city called Corinth – we can read about this in a letter written to the church some 20-25 years after the first day of Pentecost, preserved in the Bible: 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, especially Chapters 12, 13 and 14.

But this whole issue of what constitutes evidence for the experience of God – which we might call “a tussle between the spectacular and the ordinary” – did not just begin with the early church, as if they were the first ones to have to deal with it. There’s no question, for example, that it was an issue which was going on in a slightly different way, but going on nevertheless, in the life of Jesus himself. Indeed, Jesus’ ministry (as described in Luke 4 and Matthew 4) begins with precisely this kind of tussle – asking implicitly “*If God is at work, do we need spectacular signs of that work? Or is God just as happy to work through the ordinary and perhaps even happier?*”

Specifically, this is the issue in two of the three temptations that Jesus faces immediately after his baptism in the Jordan, and before his public preaching ministry begins: two of the temptations are clearly about the tussle between the spectacular and the ordinary.

- In one, the devil takes Jesus up to the pinnacle of the temple; it would be up way above our roof right here and says to him ‘*Jump down. If you are the Son of God jump down. You know that God will protect you. He’ll send his angels and when people see that ha, they’ll believe. Do the spectacular.*’ And Jesus says, ‘No. I’m not going to do it.’
- ‘*Well let’s change directions,*’ says the devil. ‘*Look at all these stones,*’ (and if you go to the Holy Land you will be impressed at the number of rocks and stones absolutely everywhere). ‘*Turn these stones into bread. People need bread. Do the spectacular. Solve the problem.*’ And Jesus says, ‘No, I’m not going to do it.’

Now we have to be careful here: there is no question that there were things that Jesus did that were absolutely spectacular. No doubt about that at all!

When you walk on water, that’s spectacular.

When you feed a crowd of 5,000 people, that is spectacular.

When you change water into wine, that is spectacular.

When you rise from the dead, that is spectacular.

The Creator puts on a spectacular show for us in nature every day of our lives.

Jesus wasn’t against the spectacular. God is not against the spectacular. All creation is an enormous spectacle. But what Jesus was doing in resisting these temptations was establishing the fact that the primary path of his life, and the effectiveness of his life, and the salvation that he

would win for you and me through his life, would not come *not through the spectacular but through the ordinary*. In other words,

- the most powerful event in all of human history would not be somebody jumping down from a high building and being protected by an angel.
- The most spectacular event in all of human history would not be a miracle by which thousands would be fed, or even a miracle by which a man would rise from the dead.
- The most spectacular event in all of human history would not be wind blowing into a room and tongues of fire resting on people's heads, or tongues of unlearned languages being spoken.

***Rather, the most spectacular even in all of human history would be the willingness of Jesus, the Son of God, to die on a cross in humility all alone in love for you and me when there was hardly anybody there to see; where nobody would be impressed by what was going on.***

That was the most impressive act in all of history. And Jesus in his temptation was choosing that path, humbling himself to the point of death, over the path of the spectacular for your salvation and mine. The most extraordinary event and in a different sense spectacular event in history is embodied for us in the cross – this symbol which is above our heads every time we gather for worship here in this sanctuary.

This was a path that Jesus chose. So not surprisingly when it comes to having evidence of the presence of the living resurrected Jesus within our lives, evidence of the Holy Spirit within our lives, the apostle Paul argued with the Christians in Corinth that that evidence did not lie in what they deemed to be spectacular but in the simple and yet remarkable presence of love – in the simple yet remarkable presence of love.

Many people miss this. Many Christians miss this. We live in an environment now (as people have done from time to time in history – think of the Roman coliseum!) which loves the extraordinary, loves the spectacular, and loves something new. . . whereas love, when it is lived out to the extreme, is often so ordinary, mundane, down to earth, that it doesn't look like much. But it takes the power of God for it to be real and life-changing.

The Christians in Corinth missed this. They loved the spectacular. Corinth was a city in southern Greece, a booming economic center, a place of great trade, and when the gospel came to Corinth there were certainly some spectacular experiences of God's presence along the way. But the church was being torn apart by the "spectacular crowd" telling others in the church that *unless they had the same experience as them they weren't real Christians; they weren't spiritual Christians. They had not experienced the Holy Spirit.*

And it's in that context that the apostle Paul writes to them the letter from which we read just a few moments ago: 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians – seeking, in part at least, to resolve a tussle going on between the relative merits of the ordinary and the extraordinary, the unspectacular and the

spectacular, with one group saying “we’ve experienced the spectacular and we want more of this, whereas you others, well, you are not quite up to our standards.”

Indeed, in the church in Corinth there were some who were making the argument that I mentioned earlier: that if Pentecost, the birthday of the church, was a day of spectacular witness to the presence of the Holy Spirit then we need Pentecost Plus, we need to supersize Pentecost. This should be the experience of everyone. If on *that* day they spoke in the tongues of men, of human beings, in languages that people from all over the known world could understand, shouldn’t we expect an even greater experience – speaking not only in the tongues of men, but of angels, the language of heaven itself?

The logic seemed simple and clear, and would have created a crisis of faith amongst many who had had no such experiences, leaving them feeling that they were not worth much, and in particular, not “spiritual”. . . saying to themselves, “*Perhaps I don’t have the presence of Jesus in my life as you do! Perhaps I don’t have the Holy Spirit as you do!*”

Instead of the church being unified by the presence of the risen Jesus, the church was being torn apart. And it’s into that context that the apostle Paul writes the 13<sup>th</sup> Chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, which is perhaps one of the most widely read and known chapters in all of scripture. You hear it at weddings, in gorgeous settings. But in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, Chapter 13 is not only poetry but powerful polemic: a polemical argument about the unquestionably primary experience that you and I need to have as evidence of the Holy Spirit. It’s a polemical discussion, a battle cry about the primary evidence of God’s presence, the living presence of Jesus Christ within our lives: love . . . Christ-like, sacrificial love!

So let me read to you part of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians Chapter 13 again. I would suspect that most of us here have heard it many, many times. Perhaps, though, you will hear it in a slightly different way as I read it again now: not merely poetry but polemic.

*“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels [DR: that is, if I have the experience of Pentecost and Pentecost Plus] but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or [DR: that is, my voice is not like the sound of a mighty rush of wind, the evidence of God, but it’s far more like a noisy gong] or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and if I have all faith so as to move mountains [DR: in other words if I can stand up in front of you and preach like Simon Peter on the day of Pentecost, looking back to the ancient scriptures and interpreting them for our lives today in a powerful way so that hundreds of people repent and are baptized] I am nothing. And if I give away all my possessions [DR: as the Spirit-inspired early church did as a response to Pentecost] and if I hand over my body so that I may boast [DR: if I appear to be spiritual but my motives are wrong] but do not have love, I gain nothing. [DR: None of this adds up to a hill of beans without love, however spiritual these experiences may seem. What counts, Paul goes on to say, is the ordinary – ordinary love!]. Love is patient, love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or*

*arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth.* [DR: Some of these characteristics are virtues that people never see. They go on inside of our lives: invisible to others, but visible to God]. *Love bears all things; believes all things; hopes all things.* [DR: This love is not a flash in the pan; indeed it may not be flashy at all! But is a long term way of life.] *Endures all things. Love never ends.*

That's the sign of the Holy Spirit: enduring love.

- When these characteristics of love are the things we want passionately in our lives that is the sign of the presence of Christ by his Holy Spirit.
- When we are willing, however faltering our willingness may be, to be patient and kind at the very moment when that's the last thing we want, that is the sign of the presence of Christ by his Holy Spirit.

Or let me put it another way. In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul is not only describing the life we should all experience by the power of the Holy Spirit, but he is clearly describing the life of Jesus himself, the life of the one who wants to live within you and me. If he is present within us his life, his real life, his humble down to earth life of love will be the evidence of his presence. Paul might as well be writing this:

Jesus is patient; Jesus is kind; Jesus is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Jesus does not insist on his own way; Jesus is not irritable or resentful; Jesus does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. Jesus bears all things for me; believes all things will work for good for me; hopes all things for me; Jesus endures all things for me. Jesus' love for me and for his world never ends.

If the risen Jesus is in our community, if the risen Jesus is in my life and your life, if, in other words, the Holy Spirit is here – then the ordinary, yet extraordinary, loving life of Jesus himself will be the primary manifestation by which we know it. The most important thing in Jesus' life was not his miracles but his loving sacrificial death, and what he offers us is the experience of the power of this love within our own lives as we seek to follow him. We cannot serve like Jesus in our own power. We cannot give our lives away like Jesus in our own power. But when he walks beside us, and comes to and live within us, when the resurrection becomes more than just a doctrine ("I believe Jesus is alive") but a living presence, then and only then can we begin to live like him. This is the sign; this is the sign of God at work.

Sure: God loves the spectacular. I hope that there are many spectacular signs of God's work in your life and mine. But it's the ordinary which is the place where the rubber meets the road.

May we know this extraordinary, ordinary presence of God through the risen Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives today and always. Amen.

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