

Pentecost June 12, 2011  
The National Presbyterian Church

# There Was No Spirit

John 7:37-39

Rev. Patrick Willson

“**T**here was no Spirit,” the gospel of John says: “no Spirit.” This is hardly what we expect when we come to worship on the day of Pentecost to celebrate the giving of the Holy Spirit. The gospel of John startles us in many ways, but John is particularly startling in what he says about the Holy Spirit. How can John say, “There was no Spirit?”

If you were reading along in the pew Bibles, you might have noticed a footnote has been placed on this odd verse of scripture and in the margin at the bottom of the page it says: “Other ancient authorities read *for as yet the Spirit* (others, *Holy Spirit*) *had not been given.*” What happened there was that scribes copying John’s gospel had also been startled by what John said. They had been disturbed by what John said and they decided helpfully to

correct it and bring it in line with what everyone knows and what the Church believes: the Spirit had not been given. But that is not what John wrote. John wrote something tough and knotty, something not easily digestible and something that requires us to pause and think. He wrote: "There was no Spirit?"

How can John say, "There was no Spirit?"

John knew his Bible. John knew the *Torah*, the first five books. He knew how the story began. In only the second verse of the Bible, Genesis chapter one, verse two, the Spirit of God moves over the waters and creation begins. The creation begins with the Spirit.

How can John say, "There was no Spirit?"

John knew his Bible. John knew the Psalms. He heard the 104<sup>th</sup> Psalm singing about the Spirit of God animating the whole creation, God surrendering God's own breath to every creature. God not only creates a world but creates creatures living to live in it: cattle, goats, storks, roaring lions and creeping things in the sea, every one of them alive with the life the Spirit gives them.

How can John say, "There was no Spirit?"

John knew his Bible, knew the promises of Scripture. John remembered the promises of the prophet Isaiah as he recounts Jesus' words: "For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring."

How can John say, "There was no Spirit?"

When John was writing his gospel there were spirits aplenty in the Greco-Roman world that stretched around the Mediterranean Sea. Just as sea travel made it possible to import Egyptian grain to Rome and Ephesus, so also Egyptian religion was imported and fashionable in

many cities. The oracle of Delphi created an enormous tourist trade but every city had their local spirits, gods and goddesses who bestowed or withheld favor. Religious alternatives were many. Just from the characters we meet in our New Testament we know that there were several kinds of Judaism available. You had the Sadducees who read only the *Torah*, the five books of Moses; you had the Pharisees with a wider reading list and a passion for making the laws relevant to the modern day; and you had the followers of this Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth and who knows about them? It was a very spiritual time. When Jesus worked miracles people did not ask, “Did he really do miracles?” They wondered, “By what spirit does he do these things?” There were all kinds of spirits; which spirit is associated with Jesus? There were all kinds of spirits, lots of spirits.

How can John say, “There was no Spirit?”

Like John, we live in a time with all kinds of different spirituality. Spirituality is fashionable these days. We may be divided by religious affiliations but we are united in believing spirituality to be important.<sup>i</sup>

We walk around a vast marketplace of spirituality. To measure the alternatives I went exploring. I clicked onto Barnes and Noble bookstore website, typed the word “spirituality” into the search window, paused for a moment, then bravely hit “enter.” The computer lurched and rocked with effort. I thought for a moment I smelled smoke. When the screen finally huffed and puffed itself into shape it reported **119,231** titles with the key word “spirituality.”

There were predictable popular writers: Henri Nouwen, Deepak Chopra, Scott Peck, the Dalai Lama and Pope Benedict; but there were less predictable ones as well:

a volume on the spirituality of singer/songwriter John Denver, and one on the spirituality of kung fu film star Bruce Lee.

There was Roman Catholic spirituality, Lutheran spirituality, Reformed spirituality, Orthodox spirituality, Quaker spirituality, Swedenborgian spirituality, Hindu spirituality, Sufi spirituality, Taoist spirituality, Zen spirituality, Jewish spirituality, and a book of Jewish spirituality for Christians. There was Celtic spirituality, Rastafarian spirituality, American spirituality, Pagan spirituality; books on Cherokee, Sioux and Navajo spirituality, as well as a book on spirituality from the Canyon Ranch Spa and on the spirituality of Frank Baum's Land of Oz.

One book described spirituality as a strategy for getting rich, another as a way of being satisfied with what you have, and yet another as a way of leaving behind material things altogether.

Books invited us to meet God for the first time, to find God in spite of what an abusive church told you about God, to get in touch with God the Father, God the Mother, to discover God that is the best part of you or God that is a part of your brain, as well as spiritualities without God at all. And, of course, the book inevitably titled *Spirituality for Dummies*.

We have all these different, wildly different spiritualities, we have all these spirits: how can John say, "There was no Spirit?"

People have told me that they sense a new spirit moving through The National Presbyterian Church. You elected a new Senior Pastor, Dr. David Renwick. People are excited about what is happening, people are filled with anticipation for what is to come, people are anxious to get

on with the future, and I hear so many people telling me they sense a new spirit at The National Presbyterian Church.

Naturally, I am glad to hear this. I am always happy when people are excited about their church and I am glad to hear people think things are going well. Sometimes pastors can be the last to detect these things happening. We spend so much time here, so busy, so many meetings, that we sometimes don't notice the changes. I hope people are right when they say that a new spirit is moving The National Presbyterian Church.

But I suspect that John is also right when he declares—to the embarrassment of scribes copying his gospel and perhaps also to our consternation—that “There was no Spirit.” It is great to be excited about The National Presbyterian Church and there is every reason to be filled with anticipation for what the future will bring. Too long has The National Presbyterian Church been assailed by smaller, meaner spirits. I am delighted professionally and personally that the people of The National Presbyterian Church sense a new spirit that supplies energy and encouragement and hope. I'm glad for that spirit, I rejoice in it, and give thanks for it—but that is not the Spirit John is talking about.

For John there's only one Spirit that counts and that is the Spirit of the crucified Christ. John's words shock us, “There was no Spirit,” but John goes on to explain, “as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”

Watch out when John speaks of glory and glorification; it's not what we think. “My ways are not your ways,” says the Lord God of hosts, and our ideas of glory and glorification are not what John has in mind. When John speaks of the glorification of Jesus, he always

has this faraway look in his eyes because he's always looking toward Calvary and a crucified man dying on a cross. That's glory for John. Glorification equals crucifixion in the gospel of John. John says, "There was no Spirit," because at that point in his story of Jesus there was not yet any cross.

Later in his story Jesus will announce the time change, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (12:23) and he will explain, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (15:13) The Spirit is a Spirit of self-giving and self-sacrifice. The Spirit is a Spirit of surrender.

In the gospel of John there is not the slightest notion that Jesus dies as a victim. No, Jesus says, "No one takes [my life] from me but I lay it down of my own accord" (10:18). In the gospel of John Jesus dies on the cross saying, "It is accomplished" (19:30) God's design is accomplished; God's plan for the salvation of humankind is complete. That is the Spirit Jesus gives to the church. That is the Spirit of surrender that builds the Church.

A Spirit of surrender: we speak of surrendering our lives to Jesus Christ but we fail to calculate fully the dimensions of that surrender. We surrender our lives but we need also to surrender our opinions in order to live in Christ's community. We surrender our self-righteousness and sense of rightness to the righteousness of God who calls all these different kinds of people into the church. We speak of surrendering ourselves to Christ but hesitate to go on and talk about how... and how much we will surrender our wealth to build his Church.

If I were to characterize the great majority of those books I discovered on the internet, I would guess that most of them understood spirituality as a means to feeling good.

I'm for spirituality and I'm for feeling good, but John knows there is more to Christian life than that. When we say that we detect a new spirit moving through The National Presbyterian Church, it's great that we feel good about what's happening around here, but the Spirit Jesus Christ gives intends more for the Church than that.

Let me be quick to explain that it does not intend less. The alternative the Spirit proposes to feeling good is not feeling bad. The Spirit does not believe feeling good is good enough for the people of God.

The Spirit wants the Church to feel glorious—no, it's not just about how the Church feels—the Spirit wants the Church to *be* glorious: gloriously surrendering itself as a witness to God's love, gloriously sacrificing preoccupation with self to demonstrate the vastness of God's plan, gloriously yielding itself to God's purposes, gloriously embracing weakness to discover the Spirit's power. That is the Spirit, John tells us, that Jesus Christ gives to the Church.

When Jesus gives the Holy Spirit in the gospel of John it's not the big, dramatic spectacle on the day of Pentecost that Luke tells about in the Acts of the Apostles. When John describes the giving of the Spirit it is very gentle, very quiet, very intimate.

Jesus breathes upon the disciples, John says. Jesus speaks to the disciples in reassuring tones. "Peace be with you," he says, blessing them, and "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," he breathes upon them saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (20:19-23). The Spirit Jesus gives is the Spirit of Forgiveness. It is not a Spirit of judgment, it is not a Spirit of condemnation, it is not a Spirit of blame.

It is a Spirit of Forgiveness because Jesus has purchased the Spirit of Forgiveness at the cost of his life. Forgiveness does not come cheap; the Spirit Jesus gives is a treasure costing absolutely everything. But Jesus gives it to his Church; once again he surrenders his life so that we might have life.

“Peace be with you,” he says, and “Receive the Holy Spirit,” and he breathes his very life into his disciples.

Before he does this however, the crucified Christ shows the disciples his wounded hands. He wants to make sure they recognize him, but he also wants to make sure they recognize the character of the Spirit they are given.

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<sup>i</sup> The preacher is indebted to Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides Us and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

*Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.*

**THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

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