

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Romans 8:1-17

Being Spiritual

Many people today, especially younger adults, say they are "spiritual but not religious." By this they seem to mean that they are open to the existence of something transcendental - that there is "someone there" who they would probably like to know more about - but have no respect for religious institutions. In Christian terms, they might believe in God but don't like the Church.

Some of that comes from the general distrust of institutions, hierarchy, and authority that is common among younger people. Some of it comes from their perception that moral issues are complicated, and they want to work them out for themselves without some institution giving them instructions on how to live their lives. Whatever the underlying motives, when coupled with the fact that everyone is busy, the result is a great gap in many churches of people between the ages of about 15 and 35.

Spirituality from a Christian viewpoint is about the relationship between our spirit - whatever exactly that inner "me" is - and the Spirit of God. Biblically the Spirit is known as "the Spirit of the LORD," "the Spirit of Christ," or more often "the Holy Spirit." On the Feast of Pentecost, when the Spirit came in power on the early Church, it's worth asking how the Holy Spirit makes Christians "spiritual" and what "Christian spirituality" looks like.

So let us look at a few basics, both from the words of Jesus and from the experiences of the early church a generation later.

1) *Jesus Is Lord*

Jesus said that when the Holy Spirit came to his followers, the "Spirit of truth" would "teach them all things and remind them of him." A primary role of the Spirit is as teacher, and his main job is to teach us about Jesus. Since the day Jesus Ascended, that work has been mainly carried out through the writings of his followers - that is through the New Testament, through the Bible.

The Spirit makes this old book intelligible to people of all ages and generations, and shows us the origins, the goals, the teaching, the life and death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The Spirit makes readers of the Word aware that Jesus is indeed still alive, and can be encountered. The Spirit convinces us that we should trust Jesus, and plants in us the seed of faith.

So the Spirit begins by working in our minds to teach us, and then creates faith. Faith is not a nebulous leap, not irrational, not fundamentally different from what we call knowledge. Knowing, believing, having faith, are all more alike than different, and all involve cognitive assent to facts, a recognition that those facts have consequences, and an act of will that

embraces them as important for me. Knowing always involves commitment.

Reflecting Jesus' promise of the Spirit as teacher, Paul the Apostle, 20 years later, wrote of the experience of the Christian community that *"no-one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit."* To confess Jesus as Lord and Savior and to follow him in faith as his disciple is a work of the Holy Spirit. If you ever wonder whether you have experienced the work of the Spirit in you, here is a basic test: can you say and mean "Jesus is Lord," with all that implies for the ordering of your life, your priorities, your allegiances, your goals? If Jesus is Lord, then you are not, and nor is Caesar or his modern equivalents. If the Spirit has made Jesus plain to you, your social life, your family life, your moral life, your work life are all affected, perhaps deeply.

2) *God is our Father*

Secondly, coming to know Jesus through the teaching of the Spirit leads us to an unexpected new view of God. Jesus said *"I and the Father are one,"* and *"whoever has seen me has seen the Father."* So the Creator, Sustainer and Judge of the universe is like Jesus.

And Jesus called him *"Abba, Father,"* a term of endearment and intimacy - a sort of Aramaic "Dad" - and he encouraged his followers to do the same. *"When you pray, say 'Our Father in heaven...'"* When we have learned about Jesus, we suddenly know much more about God, and that is often very different from what we thought we knew before. He is not a remote and judgmental figure, an all-powerful majesty who gives rules and waits to punish those who break them. He is not a God of terror and destruction, of battles and genocide.

He is *"Father"* to those who have faith in Jesus. Indeed *"those who believe and receive Jesus"* become *"children of God."* Believers are adopted into God's family, and become Jesus' *"brothers and sisters,"* and *"joint heirs with him."* We discover that God our Father is a gracious, compassionate, loving father who desires the best for his children.

Paul the Apostle wrote, for the next generation of believers, *"God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out 'Abba, Father'."* *"The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children... by him we cry 'Abba, Father'."* So here is a second test of whether the Spirit is at work in us; whether in Christian terms we are *"spiritual people."* Do we see, do we experience, God as Father? If so, we know a sense of relief because we have discovered he is a gracious and not a vengeful Father. People in whom the Spirit has never worked still see God as remote and threatening. People in whom the Spirit works know him as close by, gracious and good.

3) *Streams of Water*

Thirdly, Jesus announced in the Temple Courts that *"whoever was thirsty should come to him and drink."* Whoever did that would discover that *"streams of living water would flow from within them,"* by which he meant the Spirit. The Spirit within would be life-giving, and bubble up like a spring; the source of an ever-flowing stream of water.

Paul reflected that experience when he said that for the believer in Jesus, all the troubles of life produce perseverance, character and hope, and that *"hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit."* The Spirit plants not just a seed of faith in our minds, not just a cry of "Dad" on our lips, but a source of sustenance and life deep within us. The *"streams of living water"* are what keep

believers going when they are surrounded by drought, lost in the wilderness, alone in the desert.

The Spirit gives the believer hope – hope that nothing warrants despair, that this too shall pass, that our Father will never leave us or forsake us, that with every trial he will make a way out, that patience and perseverance are possible because we have an invisible means of support. We grow like a tree whose roots are fed by a stream, and when everyone else is wilting in the heat, we remain green and calm and hopeful.

If you know the hope that God's Fatherhood and his love produce within, then the Spirit has been and is at work in you. Not only can you survive, you can flourish even in hard times, because of the streams of water within.

4) *A Temple Where God Dwells*

One more sign of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said that he would *"destroy the temple made with hands, and raise it in three days."* He meant that the days of stone and wood and gold and jewels were coming to an end, and the Holy of Holies where God dwelt was now within him, in Jesus his Son.

Paul wrote to 1st C. Christians *"do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?"* People who had by the work of the Spirit come to faith in Jesus, experienced the love of God their Father that turned into peace and hope within them, were now collectively the new dwelling place of God, his new temple. As a community of believers, they were now God's house; they were part of God's household, they were incorporated into the Body of Christ. They were now a community of the Spirit, the people of God for a new age, the Church of Jesus Christ.

The Spirit gathers faithful followers of Jesus into communities of mutual support, worship, learning, and service. They discover each other. They learn the truth that *"we love because he first loved us."* They experience what it is like to actually live the two great commandments: *"to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself."*

If you have been drawn by your faith in Jesus and your experience of the Father's love into the community of his people – his Church – then the Holy Spirit has been and is still at work within you. You are now living a "spiritual life." You are now a "spiritual person." You can be "spiritual" without being afraid of "institutional religion," because the Church of Jesus Christ is first and above all a community, the people of God, and not an institution.

To be sure, community is easier to experience in some churches than others. Being small makes a difference, lacking a hierarchy makes a difference, not issuing lists of rules makes a difference. Are you a "spiritual" person? Then you are welcome here. Or does it all still sound mysterious to you? Then grasp, if you will, the simple acts of the Spirit of God – to introduce you to Jesus as Lord, to God as Father, to the spirit as your inner security, to the Church as a community.

May Pentecost be a time when the wind and fire reach you and blow away, consume, your confusions, your misconceptions, your fears, your dislike of organizations; and bring you a place of spiritual belonging, to where "spirituality" is simply being a believer, a child of God; a secure person, happily living in community.

Let us pray...