

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### John 14

### *"Spirit At Work"*

It is basic Christian theology that the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives, in our churches, in the world. But how do we know that? What are the signs of the Spirit's presence? The first thing to say is that no-one becomes a Christian without the work of the Spirit: "No-one," says the Apostle Paul "can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Spirit" (1 Cor 12). Faith in Jesus is a gift of the Spirit. But what else does the Spirit do?

#### 1) *Worship*

One of the first signs of the Spirit's work is *worship*. Whatever else Christians do - alone, together, in prison, under persecution, on a hillside, in a cathedral - they worship, gathering together with other believers if possible.

The early church after the spirit came at Pentecost gathered frequently because they were "devoted to teaching, fellowship, prayer, the breaking of bread.. praising God" (Acts 2). Jesus had said "God is Spirit... and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4). So the Spirit shows his presence by inspiring people to worship God the Father and Jesus his Son.

But you already know this: you have friends and family members who don't believe, and you know you can't convince them to have faith by argument! You and I cannot evoke a spirit of worship deep within other people;

only the Spirit of God can do that. What we *can* do is invite them into places and groups where the Spirit is more likely to speak to them - that is, within the community of faith.

Most people come to faith by being in a worshipping community, however reluctantly at first! Worship draws us to God. In your surveys, *worship* is what most people comment on - and that's right and proper for at least two reasons. Sunday worship is for many people their chief contact with the life of the church - say "church" and most people *think* of Sunday worship, not the youth group or the food pantry..! (That's why many people think I only work 1 hour per week!) Secondly, worship is the vital center and the motivating force for every other Christian endeavor. Only people who experience the reality of God in worship are ready to take on the tasks that make up the rest of Christian life.

#### 2) *Truth*

Beyond worship, the second and related evidence of the Spirit's presence is that people want to learn the truth about God, about his Son Jesus, about his work in the world, and about themselves. Jesus called the Holy Spirit "the Spirit of truth who will teach you all things" (Jn 14).

People in whom the Spirit is at work are learning and want to know the truth of God

revealed in his Word. People outside the faith usually could care less what's in the Bible; Christians usually want to know more about it. The New Testament says one of the primary gifts the Spirit gives the church are its *teachers*, and one task of the church is to pass on "the deposit of faith" from generation to generation. Teaching is central because the Word and the Spirit are God's appointed ways to bring us to know him; and because Christianity has a certain shape and certain boundaries - it cannot mean whatever we want it to mean. There are things to be learned, and applied to our lives.

Our worship services and our church life are not random or unconsidered: over time and through thought they have acquired the shape and form they do because we believe that reading Scripture, praying together, singing together, hearing the Word of God expounded, are God's ways of drawing people to himself. Our Reformed, Evangelical and Congregational traditions tell us - our very architecture tells us - that preaching the Word is the center of our worship (the *pulpit* is front and center). Reading and preaching the Bible are a major part of our worship services; we have four weekly Bible studies; our Sunday School teachers themselves study the Bible so that they can teach it to our children.

### 3) *Using Our Gifts*

The gift of teaching is just one way the Spirit makes communities of faith viable and interesting! He distributes diverse gifts among God's people - *teaching, serving, leading, governing, giving, working, encouraging, healing, evangelizing* - for the benefit of the faith community; for the blessing of those who are being served, taught, encouraged; and for the glory of God.

We talked last week about diversity, so I won't belabor it today. "As each Spiritually-

gifted part does its work... the body is built up" says the Apostle Paul (Eph 4). The goal of these spiritual gifts is unity and maturity. I repeat how grateful I am that so many people here use their gifts to teach, preach, give money, collect and distribute food, make music and song, take teens on mission trips, repair and paint building, rake yards for people, run a thrift store that supplies hundreds of people with cheap clothes, furniture and household "stuff."

In our Congregational tradition, that's how a local church "works" - the Spirit gifts and inspires the people to do the work. We do not rely on "paid professional religious people;" our decision-making, our budgets, our staffing, our ministries, the work of the church in the community and in the world, are done *by the congregation*; by the people of God guided and strengthened by the Spirit of God!

### 4) *Fruits of Maturity*

When all this goes well, the Spirit produces Christian maturity - in individual believers and in the Christian community. The most famous New Testament expression for that is the "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal 5). "Fruit" is a metaphor for the *"attitudes, virtues and behavior"* (G. Fee) of a mature Christian believer and a mature Christian community. Trees and shrubs bear fruit in the Fall, and more as they grow older. Fruit (for the most part) does not appear in the Spring, or on young trees; it emerges naturally from maturity.

The fruit of the Spirit in a mature Christian life includes *"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."* Some of these are internal, but most are communal - this is how mature Christians deal with one another and with the world they are called to serve. When the Spirit is bringing a Christian to maturity,

these are the attitudes, virtues and behaviors you begin to see in their lives and their interactions with other people.

How is the Spirit doing in you and me? Are we cooperating with him? How much have our attitudes improved in the past five years? Ten years? Or turn it around: if we continue as we are now, what kind of people will we be, 20 years from now?

*Love*, we discovered, is from a Biblical viewpoint "devotion to the welfare of another person" - not an emotional or passionate condition, but a willed dedication. It is the greatest of Christian virtues, the one that outlasts all the gifts, the only thing we will still value in our last days, the only thing that lives on with us - loving, valued, treasured relationships. How are we doing? Are we more or less loving than we used to be?

Any *joy* and *peace* in our lives? These are more than internal states of mind, of course. They are attitudes that shape our dealings with people; they are relational. We get *joy* by willful acts: "rejoice in the Lord always," says Paul (Phil 4). We get *peace* by being peacemakers. Joy grows when we learn to live in faith and hope in God, even when we are also dealing with sorrow and trouble. Joy provides the even keel, the hidden strength, the amazing capacity that some people have of being calm and serene in the face of tragedy. *Peace* is not just putting down our weapons, (though many people need to do just that) but is about wholeness, about becoming an integrated person, about living in harmony with ourselves and with God and with other people.

*Patience*, some say, is the hardest virtue to acquire! Many of us would agree - that's not "the way we are wired"! But patience is a mature virtue for a Christian. It means bearing with people who annoy us or afflict

us; it means refusing anger as inappropriate and ineffective; it means forgoing retribution when that is all we can think of! *Kindness*, *gentleness*: not so different from patience. They are what happens when we experience God's grace and then become gracious in our dealings with other people. People may not deserve our kindness; we may feel anything but gentle towards them; but the gracious thing to do, the Godly thing to do, the Christ-like thing to do, is to be kind and gentle.

*Goodness*? We know we can't fake it; it's one virtue that comes from deep within. You and I know, probably, a handful of really *good* people. But that's what the Spirit is meant to make of *all* of us! *Faithfulness*? It's not just about sexual fidelity; it's about emotional fidelity; it's about being trustworthy in business; it's about being reliable; it's about loyalty. One of the bad side-effects of our hectic society is that nobody feels they can make a commitment to anything. "My company may fire me next week, so I feel no commitment to them. I never know when my husband will be home. My kids are getting sick again. I have no idea what I will be doing next week! I can't make any commitments to do a certain thing on a certain day!" It's hard in our culture to be loyal, to be reliable, to be faithful to your word. But mature Christians ought to be examples of faithfulness.

*Self-control*? It's what the old translations call "temperance," meaning moderation in all things. That means not just alcohol or food, but anything else that we indulge in. I suspect more than half our families have family members - parents, children, siblings, spouses - with drug or alcohol problems. We know that obesity is a major problem in our culture, and the health effects it brings are getting worse every year. But our societal stress levels are so high that we "treat ourselves," over and over, to make ourselves feel better and to get us through whatever

crisis we are in! The spiritual fruit of self-control does not mean “sucking it in” or becoming ascetic; it means letting the Spirit control our appetites, and not letting them run wild. This is a mark of Christian maturity; as we get older, we should show more control, not less!

Aging, they say, is easy; maturing is hard! We need the Spirit of God within us and among us to produce more and more mature “fruit” over the years. But we are also called to “*keep in step with the Spirit!*” God give us all grace to be more fruitful by next Fall!

Let us pray....