

“Christian Spirituality”
Isaiah 63:10-16; Galatians 5:13-26;
Matthew 12:24-30

Pastor Norman Fowler
February 15, 2015
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

*How many years can a mountain exist before it gets washed to the sea?
How many years can some people exist before they're allowed to be free?
Yes, and how many times can a man turn his head, pretending he just doesn't see?
The answer my friend, is blowin' in the wind; the answer is blowin' in the wind.*

My question is: is that refrain a Christian theological statement? The answer is blowing in the wind. What did Jesus say about the Spirit? It was free to blow wherever it will. In fact, spirit could be translated as wind.

I don't know that Bob Dylan was thinking theologically when he wrote that song. But maybe it speaks in a way to the way we deal with the Spirit and how hard it is when we come to the third person of the Trinity. It's interesting to me that we speak of the Spirit as the third person in the Trinity. We often think of the Spirit as the last one, and I sometimes wonder if that's how we would like to keep the Spirit—as the last, and a little at arm's length. There are a couple of reasons for that.

One of the reasons that we struggle with the Spirit is simply because it blows in the wind. It's a little out of our control. We don't know exactly what it's going to do. What would happen if the Spirit came blowing in here? Would we want it to? So there's a little hesitancy with the Spirit sometimes because we're not sure what it's going to do.

I think we, in the reformed tradition, have another kind of hesitancy with the Spirit because the Spirit often gets associated with emotionalism, and we have a tradition that's pretty rational. We can think things through pretty well. We don't always know what to do with the feelings, emotions.

So what do we do with this Holy Spirit that seems a little out of control and perhaps encounters us in ways that we're not always comfortable with? We generally would like to use our heads. Do we have a world view that even allows for the Spirit to be present? The general world view today seems to be that the world is pretty much this mechanism that just works like a clock. It got wound up at the beginning, and as long as all the parts fit together right it will just keep working. If we knew how it all fit together, we would know how everything works. There is no room for Spirit when you think about a clock, a mechanism that just keeps working. Even theologically, sometimes, I think we don't have room for the Spirit when we think about the world working. God is just making it all happen.

Our experience of the world is really not as mechanical as all that. Sometimes we like to think about the world and its stability. We even want that. We are a little worried what the Spirit might do to mess that up. But we know that the world is really not as set, it's not really quite as clear-cut as we sometimes think it is. If we were to think of

somebody coming through the door into the sanctuary, we would expect that they would fit through the doorway. We don't expect somebody to be taller than the top of the door frame. We expect them to be at least 18 inches tall if they are going to walk, and probably much taller. But if I were to ask you what the height will be of the next person coming through the door, would you know? You could give me a range, but would you be able to tell me exactly? Isn't that our life? We know a lot of things within a range, but we know very few things that are exactly going to happen.

What I'm suggesting is, in all of that variability, there's a lot of room for the Spirit to work. There is a lot of room for the Spirit to be present. So what does it mean when we begin to think about the Spirit? What does the Spirit do? What is the spiritual side of the Trinity? We know we can grieve the Spirit. We read that in scripture today. So let's think about some of the activities of the Spirit.

One activity of the Spirit seems to be creativity. Bringing about a new thought, new ways of doing things, new gifts, new activities. Shirley Guthrie, a reformed theologian and the author of the book that we have been studying on Sunday evenings, goes so far as to say that the Spirit is the source of all inspiration and abilities. Wherever there is wisdom, beauty, creativity, and truth, the Spirit is at work. So there's a way in which the Spirit is associated with creativity.

If we look at Jesus and think about what he says in terms of the Spirit or we see the Spirit at work with Jesus when the Spirit come down at his baptism, he talks about the Spirit as the one that helps him understand what God wants. The Spirit is the one he's going to leave for us so we continue to know God's presence with us. There's a communicative sense to the Spirit. In some ways when we talk about the Spirit, we're talking about God's communication with us. God speaks to us through Jesus and through scripture, but for us to interpret scripture we always need the Spirit to help us. It's not something we can do on our own. It's that communicative piece of God's continued presence with us, a sense that God can reveal himself to us through the Spirit.

Another activity of the Spirit is that out of the Spirit there come the gifts and the fruits. That's another activity of the Spirit that works in us and through us, and comes out of us, those activities.

Then, when Jesus says he's going to leave us the Advocate, we often think about how what Jesus is leaving with us is one who has compassion for us, keeps us connected to God. So often we think about the Spirit as God being present with us, God's presence. We have new life in the Spirit.

There are a variety of things we can think about. A lot of them begin with C's: creativity, communication, character, connection, compassion. These are all things that we think about as activities of the Spirit and out of which comes new life that the Spirit brings.

If we begin to think about the Spirit this way, what's our reaction or how do we deal with the Spirit? What do we do? We worship God; we follow Jesus. What do we do with the Spirit? I think one of the things our tradition has said we do is open up to the Spirit.

There has always been a struggle with defining Christian spirituality. In some ways, Christian spirituality is simply a recognition that the Spirit is active in our lives. But there is another step that we often take, and that is to think about certain practices that we can do, what those practices are about, and why we would ever do them or do Christian Spirituality? Sometimes it feels like people do things like spirituality—there is a lot of talk about spirituality today—simply so that we can have a certain experience because we want a spiritual experience. I would suggest that Christian spirituality may indeed take us to a place where we have a spiritual experience, but that's not the purpose. We often think of things like contemplative spirituality, where people quiet themselves. Sometimes it is thought of as looking within. But the purpose of looking within, taking those moments, is to see what is going on inside of me that's getting in the way, and then to try to quiet myself enough that I might take a moment and actually listen and notice that perhaps the Spirit is doing something in my life. Maybe the Spirit is present. Maybe God is communicating with me in some way. That, I think, is the value of spiritual practices. It's sitting down and trying to look and listen to what God is doing. Certainly, there is a time in that for us to lift to God what is going on in our lives. Sometimes, like in Ignation spirituality, there's a time for reflection over the course of one's day and in doing that, the purpose is not so much to think about myself, but to see where the Spirit might have been active, to see where I might have recognized that there was love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, and self-control. Where were these fruits of the Spirit active in my day? Did I recognize that the Spirit was present?

If we were to go outside and feel the wind blowing, we wouldn't say, "What in the world is that?" We know what it is. We experience it pretty commonly. I think that's the same thing that's happening with the Spirit. We encounter the Spirit daily. One of the places we experience it is in our gathering together. It seems in some way that God not only invites us to be together because God wants us to be a family, but because in being together there's a place where the Spirit works in a way that doesn't always work just on our own.

In a previous sermon, I talked about the Trinity as being God, Christ, and Holy Spirit, and they move together. It feels like God has given us another kind of trinity. He's given us God, others, and self, and in that, sometimes the Spirit works in different ways. All I'm trying to say is that it's dynamic and that maybe the Spirit does things that are unexpected, but when it does and does it with us, we are all involved. Not only is the Trinity something that works together, but the Spirit of God with us is something that has connections. It's not something separate. Sometimes we may experience it as something that's all together and sometimes we experience it as things that just feel connected, and sometimes, perhaps, out of control.

It is as God's Spirit moves among us, sometimes in ways that we don't even recognize, that we come together in community. There are times where I come away from a gathering where we've had a wonderful discussion and I feel lifted up. I bet the Spirit was active. I come away from a meal together; I come away from a worship service—there are so many ways the Spirit can work and we get to be the beneficiaries. I'm not sure we even recognize it.

The other side of that, however, is that sometimes I want to find the Spirit. I think that's sometimes a hard thing because putting your hand around the wind is a hard thing to do. Telling the Spirit to show up is not something we have the option of doing, at least not directly. There is a way I think that we're invited to recognize that even if we can't demand the Spirit do something directly for us that we know the Spirit will be with us. I think it's pretty straightforward. Jesus says if we follow him then we know that the Spirit will be active in our lives. We might not know exactly what it's going to do, but we know we have a good God that gives us a Savior to follow and that when we follow the Savior, the Spirit will be at work.

So what do we do? I think we listen. We learn to sometimes quiet the rest of our lives, or sometimes in the reflection on our lives or sometimes in the reflection together in the moment of worship, we listen. In the reading of scripture and the interpretation of scripture, we listen. We listen for the Spirit at work.

In Corinthians, it says we also live by the Spirit and I think one of the ways we can live by the Spirit is by noticing. We can notice the incredible dynamic nature of our lives that God has given us. We can notice the compassion around us. We can notice the fruits of the Spirit. We can link together in community. We know that as we do that, as a body of Christ, the Spirit will be present.

We follow Christ, and in following Christ, even when we don't know exactly how to do it or don't think we can fully do it, I think the promise is that we will be lifted by the Spirit. The Spirit enables us to do things that at times we don't think we'll be able to do on our own if we follow Christ.

Christian spirituality: listening, living by the Spirit, following Christ.

Let's pray:

Lord, we do sometimes struggle with the Spirit. It seems to just be blowing in the wind and we're not sure how to grab the answers. And yet, as you invite us to follow Jesus and to worship you, we know that the Spirit is present and moves us. Enable us to open our hearts and our minds to you, to notice the ways you might be present, to listen for the way you help us interpret scripture, to hear your word to us, and live our lives. Lord, let us follow Christ and recognize the Spirit at work. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.