

“Through the Spirit”
Romans 8:9-17; 1 Corinthians 2:6-16;
John 16:12-15

May 22, 2016
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

Over the last few weeks, as spring has worked its way in, I've had the joy of watching bare earth, which has underneath it a seed, start to pile up a little bit. And then as it piles up a little bit more, sometimes you catch a glimpse of green inside that pile. Then slowly as it starts to come up you see the sprout begin to form that first tendril of growth, and soon it begins to spread its leaves. That tender growth shows up everywhere, it seems like. We have seen the leaves come out on the trees.

It's always fascinating to me how, when we watch that growth happen, we have to come back to it time and again (or we can watch time-lapse photography). It takes its time. Growth slowly comes, and over the season, all of a sudden it just seems like there's life everywhere. Rocks don't do that.

There's something incredibly different about life as it comes in the spring, and we get to see the profusion of green, and the different colors of the flowers. We have some really brilliant orange roses that are just incredible. Life is happening. Life is such a gift. God gives us that gift. When God created the world, he created both the inanimate and the animate. He gave life, and it's incredible.

We have life and it's fascinating that we're part of that living world. But there are some things that are unique about human life. It has to do with the way we form ourselves. You see, as we grow up we don't just grow up simply by instinct. The form of our life, the shape of our path, isn't all predetermined. It's partly the choices we make. It's the contexts we live in. Some people call it the built environment around us. The families we are part of, the relationships we form—it all shapes who we are.

Paul says, “In the spirit is life because of righteousness.” I think there's something very important about what's being said there because I think what he's saying, first of all, is the righteousness of God is the very reason we have life. God has that right relationship with creation. I think there's a secondary meaning there as well. We have the life we do in part because of the Spirit. In fact, the fullness of life we can have is through righteousness, through right relationships we have with one another, with creation, and with God.

We know that we struggle with that, and that's the whole reason why Jesus came, and why he teaches us, forgives us, and rises again to show us the hope before us. Then we have moments when we encounter sparks that start a flame, giving us a great experience that sends us out. Then we have the next day. We have each next day in which we're shaped and formed. The choices we make matter because the choices we make lead us into different kinds of relationships and different kinds of experiences and different kinds of places and to different constructed worlds. We construct our own experiences in some ways, and we begin to think about and shape how we see the

world. We can begin to think we're pretty good about doing all of that. In fact, I think we come from a time when we thought we did that well enough that we didn't really need God. I call it human hubris. It's that thought that there is no mystery; we can know it all. There are no limits to our understanding.

I just look at life and that's enough to tell me that I don't understand it all. It's an incredible thing. The interesting thing I think we do to try to deal with this incredibly complex world in which our context and our decisions and all this matters, is that we try to reduce the complexity to something that's manageable. I know that I have a hard time where there are lots of things going on and I can't figure it all out. I want to try to make things manageable. How do we make things more manageable? We simplify.

There's a story about an engineer who was supposed to design a microwave. So the first thing he did was posit, that is to think about, a spherical chicken. There is no spherical chicken. But sometimes to make things work, to get a first pass at it, we simplify. The trouble with simplifying is that if we codify our simplifications, if we make our simplifications the way things really work, we all of a sudden have lost the intricacy, the complexity, the wonder of life.

What are some of the ways we do that? I think one of the ways we do that is through stereotypes. We decide this person is that way, and that person is this way. Males are all aggressive and rational, and females are all passive and irrational. I'm not saying that's right, but I am saying we do that. Black/white. Poor/rich. Educated/uneducated. What are the stereotypes we use? What are the ways in which we construct our social relationships so we know who's in what camp? It's a simplification, but when it becomes codified, when we begin to think that it really is true, it's a problem. It can be either way—we can do it to ourselves or we can do it to somebody else.

Wanting to simplify is a natural thing for us to want to do as human beings because we can't understand it all. It's hard to accept, isn't it? Or at least I think there's a certain part of us that doesn't want to accept that we can't understand it all, or that we can't have it fully understood and know exactly how everything is supposed to work. Who does know that? You know the answer, I think. God knows. And what does God tell us to do? What does Jesus do?

First, he does give us a place to start: love God with your heart, mind, and soul, and your neighbor as yourself. But like with any formula, applying it is the hard part, figuring out how it works out in our daily lives is not easy. The thing I think about is that so often we think that if we could make the world static, that it always worked a certain way, then we would have it figured out. My experience is that God has given us this incredibly dynamic world. Spring is part of what shows me that—the new life, the changing life.

Think about yourself. Are you the same person today that you were at 10 years old? At 20 years old? At 30 years old? At 40 years old? I'm going to start losing some of you. But think about it. As we go through life, we change. Would we want everybody

to treat us the same all through our lives? No. We change, we learn, we grow. We recognize what we're good at. Sometimes we recognize what we're bad at. Sometimes we recognize the mistakes we've made and we try to do things differently.

How do we deal with a world that is really dynamic, complex, intricate? Just think about all the relationships we have. Each one has its distinct nature. We don't treat everybody the same. So how do we deal with it all? What does Jesus say? When he goes away he says, "I'll give you the Spirit of Truth." The Spirit of Truth. I think it's helpful to think about the word "truth" because it's really got more to it than what I hear when I first hear the word "truth." The root of that Greek word means non-concealment. So we have a Spirit of non-concealment, or a Spirit of reality.

When we are growing up, psychologists say that we create strategies for dealing with things. We have coping strategies. Sometimes those coping strategies work really well in one situation, but then we try to use it in a different situation and it doesn't work so well. We have to learn new ways of doing things. That's because we don't see the full truth or reality of the situation. We don't see the full reality across our life-span. We need help. Why do we go to school? Why do we learn? Why do we keep learning? Because life is always changing. There's always something new. There's always an opportunity.

We can look at this in two ways. We can look at it as "I'm overwhelmed," or we can look at it and say, "There's something wonderful. There's a joy that God has given us. There's a path that God will take us on." It's interesting that in Acts, as people followed Jesus, they became People of the Way. He's going to give us a Way to go through life. What is the Way he's talking about? He's giving us the Spirit of Truth.

I find this really hard because I don't think we've developed this idea of the Spirit very well—this way of approaching our faith very well. But if you read these passages, it's about the Spirit leading us, the Spirit guiding us, the Spirit bearing witness to us, and living according to the Spirit. What does that mean?

Well, he goes on to say it's about discerning. Spiritual discernment. That's one of the reasons we're doing that as a congregation, is because it feels like there's a way in which we need to practice discernment. Anything we do takes some development and practice. The first time we try something, we may not get it right. Has anyone ever gone skiing and been able to do everything they wanted to do the first time? Any kind of activity that we've not done before takes practice.

It feels to me like our tradition has not paid a lot of attention to the presence of God in the Spirit, the Spirit of Truth that Jesus has given us. We live in this complex, incredibly intricate, beautiful world that we sometimes try to constrict, but the Spirit is there to bring us to life. We do that by trusting that God will lead us in the midst of the unknown events that are ahead of us, we trust God to be with us and to guide us. We can learn to listen to the Spirit revealing the way.

There are some things we can do. We can read scripture and allow it to work on our hearts. We can engage in listening, silence, contemplative work. We can participate in Christian fellowship, a place where the Spirit is at work. Worship is a place where the Spirit is at work. I think engaging with the Spirit takes time—time to think about and to discern the way. Am I listening to the Spirit or am I just listening to what my mother told me when I was a 5-year-old? Am I listening to the Spirit or am I just listening to a physical desire? Am I listening to the Spirit or is this just a social cue that I've learned? It takes practice.

God has given us his presence with us, the Spirit among us, the Spirit of Truth, the Spirit of reality, the one that will lead us along the way. We're going into a new landscape every day. Our life is new every morning and in that, we have a guide: The Spirit of Truth. Not always easy to understand, but the Spirit's work is to expand our lives, to help us be more alive, to overcome that which restricts and dampens life. We may not know it all, but we know who does, and we can trust in his promise to lead us into the truth, into what is real and life-giving. Amen.