

“Embracing the Spirit”
2 Samuel 23:1-4; Romans 8:1-11;
John 16:4-15

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We have been talking since the end of August about the story of our lives, particularly the story of faith. We started out thinking about how we have a God who welcomes the prodigal son and the older son. This God of grace is a God we can trust in and can have faith in, and that creates a starting point for our faith.

Then we began to think about what it means to be welcomed into the family of God: to have God welcome us home, to begin to think about what it means to be a home together, to be a family of faith, to be the body of Christ. As we went along with that, we recognized that there are certain struggles we have in being together. We struggle sometimes getting along and with having things go just as we think they should.

And, we live in a world in which the context we live in doesn't always support the very life of faith that God has invited us into. As much as we want to be those whose love is genuine, who hate evil, who show mutual affection, who hold onto what is good, and outdo each other in showing honor, and as simple as those things sound, it's not always that easy. My sense is we really do need an advocate. We need a helper, and that is exactly what Jesus is talking about.

As he goes away and the way he was walking with his disciples will no longer be the way he is with us, he's saying the advocate will come. There will be this helper, this Spirit of God that comes and is with us in our midst, and that we can participate with. I think that's wonderful news because I know I need that help.

The problem begins when we begin to think about what that means. What does it mean to say the Spirit will be here? Well, in some ways I would like to ask you all to take a piece of paper out and write the word “spirit,” and then write a definition. It would be interesting to think about what we would all put down. It feels to me like Spirit is not one of those things we are really comfortable with. We're not exactly sure what it means. Although if it's school spirit, we could sing the Vandal fight song and there's a certain kind of spirit involved. If you go to Wikipedia, the first thing they say is, “A spirit is a supernatural being often, but not exclusively, a non-physical entity such as a ghost, fairy, or angel.”

Wow! That's helpful. I don't really know what to do with that. Perhaps that's part of the problem with the Spirit. I don't know quite what to do with it. After all, there's this idea that the word “Spirit” can sometimes be written as “wind,” which suggests that it is something we can't really see, but we can feel its force. There's something transcendent about it and yet it's present and at work.

Sometimes we think about it as “breath.” Have you ever seen a saxophone sitting in a stand? It doesn't seem very alive, but when you see someone pick it up and put their

breath into it, all of a sudden that instrument comes alive. I think that's a sense there of the word—the wind that moves though we can't see it and the breath that brings life to an instrument just as God breathed life into a human being.

Still, it leaves me with a couple of problems. One, I still can't get my hands around what Spirit is. As a human being I have real struggles with things I don't fully understand. I want to feel like at least somebody has a clear sense of what it's all about. It's hard not to feel like anybody really knows fully what that is. That's part of what the word "transcendent" means—it's really beyond our knowledge, hard to know.

The other piece I have a hard time with, again partly because I'm human, is I can't control it. Most of my life, I like to be able to know what's happening. I like to be able to be in control. Here, Jesus is offering something that we can't know fully, and we can't control. I think we have to accept that. The Spirit is like the wind. We cannot really see it until we feel it. We can recognize it has power and yet we can't fully fathom it.

As we begin to do that, we can look at what Paul says about the Spirit in Romans. He's talking about the Law of the Spirit, or the law of sin and death. When he was saying that, I was trying to think about that. I always think of the law as something pretty rigid, a set of rules we have to follow, and if we break one then we have problems. But that doesn't really fit with this idea of the wind, and moving, and what the wind does bringing life.

The interesting thing is that I looked back at the root for "law," and I was taken by it. I had never noticed it before in all these years of looking back and trying to figure out what "law" means. It said the root was like the word "perimeter." It was the area that you were given to graze your flock. That makes some sense. There's the idea that there is a shape to what you can do. If you were an early herder, your life was dependent upon where you could graze. The kind of life you would have would be dependent on that ability to graze in a particular place. So we can think about the Law of the Spirit as something like the place we're given to live, to graze. It identifies the boundary within which real life is given.

Or, the other extreme is a little like this: when we open ourselves to the Spirit, I think what Paul is saying is that the Law of the Spirit is a familiar psalm—He makes me lie down in green pastures; leads me beside still waters; paths of righteousness for his name's sake. There's that image of the Spirit leading us into life. But, if we don't listen, if we don't pay attention to the place we are invited to graze and we think the grass is greener somewhere else, we often end up in the desert place—the law of sin and death.

For me, those are helpful images of beginning to think about the nature of what God is doing as we are invited to open ourselves to that Spirit—that thing we can't quite understand, but really informs and comes into our lives and moves us and shapes us, or not. It is, I think, that we are being invited to recognize that God is the one who takes us to the oasis. I just have that image of somebody trudging through the desert, always seeing the mirages, but what happens when it's really there? That seems to me what

Jesus is talking about. It's the gift of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, the one who wants to bring us fully into the life that God would give us.

So as we deal with those struggles of how to be a people together, how to live out our faith, it feels like part of that is opening ourselves to the thing we can't control but is a gift from God that would shape us and guide us into life.

Often it feels to me like I do pretty well at taking care of my physical needs. I pay some attention to my emotional needs. It's a little harder, somehow, to pay attention to spiritual needs. Perhaps it's because we don't understand the Spirit, because we don't know how to shape our lives. How to define what that is? Maybe there is some overlap between emotional and spiritual because it feels to me that as human beings the gift of God's grace is the gift we need the most, and that gift is the surprise gift of love. I think one of the central ways of recognizing the Spirit at work in our lives is to recognize that we are loved by God. It is that sense of being loved. It is the initial way God breaks through to us. It's a central piece of what we need as human beings. We can look far and wide for human beings to give us the love we need, but I don't think we will ever find the fulfillment that we need. It is through God's grace, through the surprise gift of God's love for each one of us that we receive the gift of life and peace. That's what Paul is talking about.

The interesting thing is that I often want to go and reshape the world. I think if I could just reshape the world, then I'll have life and peace. It feels like it flips on me here because what it says is to open yourself to the Spirit and allow the Spirit to give you God's love, and *that* will bring you life and peace and will reshape the world. Amen.