

“Moving Past Our Hesitation to Embrace the Spirit”

Acts 2:1-21; 1 Corinthians 12:4-13

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Baptists, at least Baptists like us, tend to approach the Holy Spirit with a great deal of caution. This is not the case for African-American Baptists; they claim the Spirit’s full empowerment without hesitation, but we hesitate, to say the least.

We know the Spirit is one of the three persons of the Trinity, but the Spirit always comes last, even if Genesis 1 says the Spirit is present at creation. We know the Spirit accompanies Jesus and guides his followers. And we would never deny the significance of the Spirit. But in everyday life, we regard the Spirit as something like a distant relative we’d rather not spend too much time around, potentially dangerous, part of the Trinity but the redheaded stepchild of Trinity — and I intend no ill will with this reference. I am a stepchild and Ian has red hair.

Part of our hesitation to embrace the Spirit is tied to misunderstandings and distortions. People in our culture have a tendency to confuse extreme emotionalism with the activity of the Spirit. We could do with a little more emotion in settings like ours, we are often too cognitive, but the balance of emotion and thought has nothing to do with the Spirit. It is about personality types and cultural differences.

My Italian cousins tend to be very physical, hugging and kissing everyone. They must be struggling during COVID-19. My English family is much more reserved. Neither dynamic is right or wrong. These are cultural differences. The Spirit moves among people of all personality types and through all cultures. A balance of thought, emotion and activity is helpful and freeing even for the Spirit, but we need to be careful not to equate the Spirit with emotional expression or idolize a different cultural form just because it is different.

Others in our culture try to link the Spirit to specific activity. Some insist the gift of tongues is the one true sign of the Spirit, even

though the Apostle Paul dismissed this perspective. Others insist that if the Spirit is present in worship, people will raise their hands and move about, shout, “Amen!” and “Hallelujah!”; carry on in a way that seems disruptive to us and, at times, contrived. A co-worker of Dana’s in another setting reacted with disappointment when she discovered that we were Baptist. “All you do in worship is just sit there,” she said.

Now, we could do with a little dialogue and movement every now and then. A well-placed “Amen” can enrich worship. When the mother of a member in Winston-Salem moved from Tennessee, where she was a member of a Pentecostal church, the member thought she would not join our church because she would not feel at home and might upset others. But she joined our church and loved it, and when she occasionally raised her hand during a prayer, hymn or sermon, often with a tear streaming down her face, it felt to me like a sign of the Spirit’s presence.

I would never want us to dismiss the place of emotion or the different ways the Spirit might move among us, but as extreme emotionalism may have nothing to do with the Spirit, constant activity and noise should not be confused with the Spirit either. In fact, they can be distracting. They can get in the way of hearing from God in more subtle ways. And it is easy to become so obsessed with such an exciting experience that we never move on to acts of service and love.

I have told some of you about a Pentecostal preacher from Argentina I heard when I was in college. He had many provoking ideas, but what I remember most is a story he told about his church. He said that it had gotten so carried away with amens and hallelujahs that it was getting out of hand, even for him. And many people who expressed wild emotion about Jesus on Sundays didn’t seem to be following him any other day. So, one Sunday he told them, “From now on, for every hallelujah, you need to perform one good deed.” This word did not stifle the Spirit, but there were fewer hallelujahs and more good deeds.

We hesitate to embrace the Spirit because of fears about extreme emotionalism and chaotic displays, but these are misunderstandings or distortions of the Spirit. Perhaps we might embrace the Spirit more fully if we had a more accurate perspective on who the Spirit is.

The Spirit is the presence of God Jesus promises will be with his followers after he has left this earth, comforting and guiding them, instructing them further in the ways of truth (John 14-16). On a more personal level, the Spirit is the part of God who has been with us during this strange period of isolation and economic uncertainty. When we feel a sudden, inexplicable sense of peace, the Spirit is the one who calms us.

According to our reading from 1 Corinthians 12, the Spirit is also the one who provides all the gifts we have in the church and then binds us together in one body, using every gift we have to make the body whole. The Spirit is the source of wisdom and knowledge, healing and teaching, prophecy and compassion, music and accounting, art and science – every gift we have in this church, every talent and ability that enables us to accomplish our mission in the world.

It is the Spirit for whom Jesus tells his disciples to wait when he ascends to be with God and it is the Spirit who is poured out on them on Pentecost. It is the Spirit who anoints Peter to preach, enables diverse people to hear the good news, falls on women and men alike as well as young and old, enables thousands to believe, guides every movement of the early church as described throughout the book of Acts.

Twelfth-century Benedictine abbess Hildegard of Bingen said this about the Spirit.

Holy Spirit,
making life alive,
moving in all things,
root of all created being,
cleansing the cosmos of every impurity,
effacing guilt,
anointing wounds.
You are lustrous and praiseworthy life,
you waken and re-awaken everything that is.

C. S. Lewis provides another image of the Spirit in his book *The Horse and His Boy*, the third *Chronicle of Narnia* (p. 158f). In a chapter entitled “The Unwelcome Fellow Traveler” a boy named Shasta learns

the true identity of the Lion who has helped him. It is Aslan, a Christ figure in the series, but in this chapter Aslan's identity is concealed for a time. As the boy anxiously walks through a mountainous region, a thick fog sets in. To heighten his anxiety, he senses the presence of another but knows not whether the other is friendly or hostile.

"Who are you?" asks the boy in a frightened whisper. "One who has waited long for you," says a voice, not loud but strong and deep. "Are you – are you a giant?" asks the boy. "You might call me a giant," says the Large Voice, "But I am not like the creatures you call giants." "You're not something dead, are you?" says the boy, "O please go away... What harm have I done to you?" The boy feels the warm breath of the Other and the Voice says, "There... That is not the breath of a ghost... Tell me your sorrows." So, he does and learns the Other is Aslan, the King of Kings, the one who has helped him all along his journey in ways he did not realize until now, the one who walked beside him through the fog, making certain he did not fall off a steep ledge.

This is who the Spirit is — a mysterious Presence who guides, comforts, and assures us. We are in a hospital room with a loved one and suddenly sense that we are not alone. We are weighed down with grief until the tears begin to flow and our burden is lightened. We don't know which way to go until we feel a sense of peace about what to do or the reality that either choice will be okay. This is the Spirit of God who has been poured out on Pentecost. We may not want to embrace chaos and emotionalism, but surely we want to embrace this Spirit!

And this would be a nice place to leave things. We hesitate to embrace the Spirit until we understand who the Spirit is. But there is one other thing that needs to be said. Even when we understand the true character of the Spirit, we might be tempted to hesitate, because when the Spirit comes into our lives, things change.

When the Spirit comes on Pentecost, a fearful disciple who has denied even knowing Jesus is empowered to proclaim the Gospel for a huge, diverse crowd. When the Spirit comes on Pentecost, people of different nations and ethnicities hear the Good News and are brought together into one new community. They do not lose their individuality

or cultural distinctions. They hear in their own languages. But the movement of the Spirit transcends all differences and makes them one.

When the Spirit comes on Pentecost, not everyone rejoices. There is resistance. Some people think the disciples are drunk. When the Spirit comes on Pentecost, young and old, women and men, slaves and free folk all have an equal place and equal voice. There is no hierarchy within the new community the Spirit is shaping.

And maybe this just sounds like the beloved community to us, the way things should be. But it is not the way things are to this day. So, if we embrace the work of this Spirit, our lives will be unsettled.

Consider the issues named in the Acts narrative. We can imagine the Spirit moving in new ways, but simply taking the issues named here, all differences are transcended, people of all races come together, and all people are included in God's new enterprise. Where do we stand on these issues today? Have we fulfilled God's vision?

No. Women and men are still not on a level playing field in our culture or the church, and as events this week, beginning in Minneapolis and Louisville, then moving all the way to our community, have reminded us, we still have major divisions and inequalities in this land. The protests have gone to dangerous extremes that serve no good purpose, though some with malintent have exploited the goodwill of others, but what the protests reveal is the deep reservoir of anger that grows out of continuing disparities which must be addressed. We should not be so distracted by the symptoms that we ignore the underlying causes of this social illness called racism. Even the experience of COVID-19 has been more intense for people of color.

These are, of course, issues for our national, state and community leaders to address, but is the church not called to speak a prophetic word of truth and justice, healing and peace, to the world around us? What did the prophet Jeremiah say to the exiles living in a strange land? "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare (Jeremiah 29:7)." Should we not seek the welfare of all in our land?

There are many things we have done in the realm of building bridges across racial differences — with the other half of First Baptist

Church, with people in need, in the diversity of our membership — but have we done enough, especially in regard to systemic issues? God envisions one community where all are on level ground. The Spirit calls us to do whatever it takes to transcend differences. If we follow this calling, there will be resistance even from within the church, but Jesus meets resistance often, the Spirit meets resistance on Pentecost. How could we think that things would be different for us if we are faithful?

So, may we embrace the Spirit without hesitation — our helper and friend, our comfort and guide, our teacher and advocate, the One who anoints Jesus to preach Good News *and* deliver the oppressed — knowing the road will not always be easy, but trusting that our calling, the Spirit's calling, is to seek God's intent, the beloved community.