

The Life of the Spirit

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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John 3:1-9, 16:12-14

Everybody knows that institutional religion is struggling right now, church membership and participation in formal religious practices and things like that, there's less of that these days. Spirituality, on the other hand, is doing just fine. Spiritual language is as popular as ever. A chef is interviewed in a high culture magazine and she says: for me cooking is a very spiritual thing. The pop star tells the world about how she too is a very spiritual person and her music is very spiritual. The Feng Shui consultant moves your living room couch and explains to you that this completely opens up the aura of the living room.

Years ago I was watching soccer, the Champions League final. The match was between Bayern Munich and Chelsea and it was for the championship of Europe. The game was exciting and it went back and forth and finally it was decided by penalty shots. Chelsea won the game when Didier Drogba slid a penalty shot behind the Munich goaltender. The announcer who was British and obviously pro Chelsea went bananas. With a fervor that you might describe as charismatic he said, "This is a great victory. This is not just a victory for Chelsea, this is not just a victory for English football! This is a spiritual victory! It is a victory for the spirit!" Just when you thought sports hyperbole couldn't get more silly.

So the conversation about spirituality is complicated outside the church, but it's also complicated inside the church. You come to a church like ours, and everything moves decently and in good order. Everything is relatively sober. You go to a Charismatic church somewhere else in town and people are falling down in the aisles and the pastor talks as if the Spirit speaks to him personally in an audible voice. All of this leads to a lot of confusion about who the Spirit is and how to discern the Spirit's movement.

So tonight, in the interest of clarity, we turn to the gospel of John to see if we can find some better understanding, to see if we can get a more refined sense of who the Spirit is and where the Spirit blows, to see if we can get a better sense of the moments in our life where something happens and we can actually say, 'the Spirit moved!'

But now, we find that even John is confusing! Did you notice the tension in our two passages? John 3 is that familiar passage where Jesus has his secret meeting with Nicodemus under the cover of darkness. Nicodemus is curious about Jesus, wants to know more about him, but also, I suspect, wants to reign him in, wants to bring him a little more in line with the orthodoxy of the Pharisees. Why do I think that? First of all, when he talks to Jesus he says "we". He speaks on behalf of a group, like maybe his colleagues sent him. And secondly the whole way he begins his conversation is the way you talk when you want to finesse someone, when you want to bring them over to your way of thinking. "Jesus you are quite a teacher. The people really love you, and those miracles of yours? Fantastic. We are all big fans of yours." You can almost hear the 'but' coming. "But you're working on your own, you didn't receive the benefit of a Pharisaical education, and we'd love it if you'd come hang out with us for a while so you could learn from us and we could learn from you." I have a strong suspicion that Nicodemus wishes to bring Jesus into the fold.

But instead Jesus blows up the fold. He seizes control of the conversation. Almost out of the blue, jumping off of Nicodemus' acknowledgement that he must come from God, Jesus says "No one can be part of the Kingdom of God unless they are born again." Nicodemus says, "What!?!?" And Jesus says, "Yes! You have to be born above by the Spirit. You have to have a Spiritual birth. Think of the wind. The wind blows and you can hear it, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going; that's how it is with the Spirit." Nicodemus says... "Huh!?!?"

Frankly I sympathize with Nicodemus here. Jesus' words here seem to jump the rails of the conversation. But that's part of the point. Here Jesus is emphasizing one of the roles the Spirit plays in our life.

The role of change agent. The role of disturber and disruptor. The Spirit is unpredictable. It blows like the wind and you can't grasp it or steer it or see it, but it blows into your life and changes things and turns your world upside down. You find yourself born again.

Jesus' image of being born again emphasizes the disruptive power of the Spirit. Preachers sometimes talk about being born again as if it is wonderful, but have you ever attended a birth? Have you seen what it's like for the baby to be brought from the warm solitude of the womb and out into the strange world of air and strange hands grabbing and pulling and prodding you? It's no wonder they scream and cry. It's not a pleasant thing now and it was an even less pleasant thing in the days of Nicodemus. Being born is a major disruption and confusion; it involves a wholesale change of your world. Jesus is revealing to us a Spirit of confusion and disruption. A Spirit who makes you uncomfortable and upends the status quo. That comes through not only in the content of his words but in their effect: Nicodemus is confused and disturbed by Jesus' words. These words are rattling his cage, pushing him toward new birth.

This isn't the only place in the Bible where we see the Spirit revealed as maker of mayhem. It's actually a New Testament theme. At the beginning of his ministry, the gospels tell us that Jesus was pushed into the wilderness by the Spirit. Mark and Luke say that he was driven into the wilderness. He was thrown there. In Acts 10 Peter goes to Cornelius' house feeling like the church belonged to circumcised Jews, but the Spirit descended on the uncircumcised Gentiles and Peter's world was disrupted, "Well... I guess the church is for non-Jews too" he says. In Acts 2 the spirit descends on the disciples and a few of their friends, and these ordinary people are suddenly preaching in the streets. The Spirit upends their life. They'd never been out of Galilee before but by the time their work is done they will have been all over the middle east and they will have faced imprisonment and beatings and all sorts of wild stuff. Disruption. Confusion. That's the sense of the Spirit you get in John 3.

But then there is John 16. What does Jesus say about the Spirit there? Jesus is talking to his disciples at the table during the last supper. They are anxious and worried because he's telling them he will leave them and they are worried about that. They pepper him with questions: "Lord where are you going? Why can't we follow you? How will we know the way to go once you're gone?" But then as a word of reassurance Jesus says: "When I'm gone, I will send the Spirit of truth and he will guide you into all truth and he will teach you everything the Father has taught me. He will take what is mine and declare it to you."

Now...what is Jesus saying about the Spirit here. Is the Spirit an agent of confusion and disruption? No. Just the opposite in fact. Now the Spirit is a source of clarity, stability, truth. The Spirit guides and teaches. The Spirit is a force AGAINST the disciple's confusion.

And this picture of the Spirit's work also ties into a larger Biblical theme. There are all sorts of places where the Spirit is spoken of as a force against confusion. In Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12 we hear about the gifts of the Spirit and among those gifts are teaching, and discernment, and wisdom. Those aren't disruptive. Or think of the Prophets who spoke by the Spirit of the Lord. They came to confused people, anxious people, and they said, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and He brings this message to you,' and then the prophet proceeded to speak a word that clarified God's intentions and plans for his people. The way Paul talks about how the Spirit inspires the Bible also points to the clarifying power of the Spirit. In 2 Timothy, he says that the Bible is God-breathed and useful for teaching, correcting and training in righteousness. Teaching and training. That's stabilizing stuff.

What in heaven's name is going on? How can the Spirit be a force for clarity and confusion? I think both these pictures of the Spirit's work are compatible and I think seeing both of these pictures will help us have a rich sense of when and how the Spirit moves in the life of our community and in our individual lives. The Spirit transforms us into the people we are meant to be by moving us through seasons of clarity and seasons of confusion. Sometimes the Spirit grows us by blowing up our status quo. Sometimes the Spirit grows us by surrounding us with warm and care. Both these spiritual seasons work together to bring us more and more into union with Christ. Both these seasons work together to transform us from one degree of glory to another.

What does the season of clarity look like? After a difficult and anxious winter, we are outside on a spring day and the sun is sparkling on the waters of Lake Michigan and we are surrounded by people we love and all of a sudden the goodness of life and the goodness of God wells up inside us. Or we are struggling with a difficult relationship and then in a sermon on the prodigal Son the pastor shows us how the Father ran toward his son in love and we have an aha moment: we get an insight into grace that helps us have a breakthrough in our trouble. Or you are standing around your dying Mother's bed singing old hymns together as a family and then you look around at one another and you realize that it is a Holy Place, that the Lord is in this place.

What does the season of confusion look like? It's the moment when you realize that all those years where you thought you were being honest and direct with people, that you were just being nasty and a lot of people were hurt. It's the moment when you begin to realize that you can't stay at your job anymore, you have to leave because the work is soul killing; you're losing your soul. It's that moment when you realize that the way you used to talk about gay people when you were in high school and the way you treated that one kid was not only wrong, but wicked.

Now, we all know which season we like best. We prefer the season of clarity of course. The season of insight and assurance. But real Spirituality has both. People who are being used and grown by the Spirit expect that the Spirit will lead them through both.

I want to close this evening with a story from the life of John Wesley. Most of you know John Wesley as a fabulously successful leader of revival in England in the 18th century and the Father of the Methodist church. Many of you know of his famous Spiritual experience at Aldersgate in London when during a worship service he felt "Strangely Warmed." He felt a strong sense of God's love for him. He felt a strong sense of the Spirit's power and nearness, and this drove him to his life of preaching and revival. It's one of the most famous spiritual experiences in church history.

But what you might not know is what happened right before that. Fresh out of school at Oxford, and full of confidence Wesley went off to America, to Savannah, Georgia where he became pastor of the Savannah parish. He was a disaster. His ministry did not go well, the people didn't like him, and to make matters worse he got involved with a local girl and they had a really complicated relationship which he later ended, only to have her come back and sue him on the grounds that he had made promises to marry her. He ended up as a defendant in court. The colonial records of the state of Georgia have this entry to sum up his time in Savannah: "Wesley, John...brother of Charles; Minister at Savannah...run away, that is, run out of town, on 3 December 1737." He left Savannah ashamed and disgraced and beaten. Less than a year after that he was sitting in Aldersgate with his heart aflame.

The question is: in which of these two events was the Spirit working? In which of these two events was the Spirit present? Which of these two Wesleyan seasons were crucial to his becoming the person God meant him to be? Both of course. Both. Congregation, I pray that you may be filled with the Spirit. That means that I pray that the Lord will bless you and keep you AND that the Lord will frustrate and confuse you. I pray that the Lord will challenge your assumptions and upend your prejudices. And that ultimately, that the Lord will turn his face toward you and smile upon you and fill you with His peace.

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