

# WHAT DOES THE SPIRIT SAY?

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**JOHN 7:37-39; 1 CORINTHIANS 12:3B-13**

**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**

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**JUNE 4, 2017/PENTECOST SUNDAY**

This year, on Pentecost, I have chosen not to base my sermon on the actual *story* of Pentecost from Acts 2.

Perhaps this seems odd to you. Perhaps you came expecting to hear the familiar story of tongues of fire, the people speaking of many languages that everyone could understand, the undoing of the confusion of Babel...

The story of the gift of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church.

You would be entirely right to expect this.

But one of the occupational hazards of preaching through the same seasons and special days each year is that you're always looking for new ways into old stories, new ways to invite people into the present realities that these old stories make possible.

So, today I thought I would try a different approach.

And I'm going to try to do it in about 10-15 minutes because I want to leave time for communion at the end. We'll see if I can do it. Another occupational hazard is lack of brevity. 😊

We heard two passages that bracket the actual story of Pentecost.

The passage from John was from *before* Pentecost. Jesus was looking ahead to the Holy Spirit and what the Spirit would make possible in the life of his followers.

The passage from 1 Corinthians was from *after* Pentecost. Paul was instructing the early church about the nature and role of the Spirit in the life of the church.

Both have something important to say to us, particularly in light of how so many of us tend to think about the person and work of the Holy Spirit, whether implicitly or explicitly.

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In my experience—and my experience is of course just that, *my* experience—people in the broad Anabaptist and evangelical orbit tend to drift toward two potentially unhealthy approaches to the Holy Spirit.

The first is found among more charismatic churches and tends to look for the presence of the Holy Spirit in the emotional temperature of a religious gathering or worship experience or with unusual experiences or occurrences.

If we were to ask the question, “What does the Spirit say?” or “Where does the Spirit move?” or “How do we know that the Spirit is real and active?” these people would point to ecstatic spiritual experiences or the loss of emotional control or in spontaneous utterances or, in some cases, in dramatic instances of physical or emotional or spiritual healing.

I have been in these contexts. I have heard things like, “that was such a spirit-filled service” or “I was overcome by the Spirit” or “you could really tell that the Spirit was present.”

I have heard pastors say things like, “I don’t really prepare much in advance for sermons or prayers, I just let the Holy Spirit speak.”

The Holy Spirit is associated—implicitly or explicitly—with loss of control, less predictability, more emotional intensity.

On the other end of the spectrum—and I’m guessing this is far more common for many of us here today—the Holy Spirit functions like the operating system of a computer or the engine of a car. We know it’s doing important work under the hood, but we have no idea how the mechanics work.

And we're pretty content that way.

We don't tend to like wild flights of emotional excess, and we're well tuned to how "Holy Spirit" language has been used and misused throughout Christian history.

We're happy to talk about God the Father, Author of Creation, Lord of history. We're even happier to talk about God the Son—Mennonites have always been Jesus-y people who emphasize that to be a disciple of Jesus means to follow his teachings.

But God the Spirit? Not so much.

So what do we do? Is there a middle ground between these two poles? Should we even be *seeking* a middle ground? It's not as though the right approach to every question is always found nicely and precisely in the middle, right?

How do we understand the Holy Spirit? How do we think of the Spirit's role? How do we discern what the Spirit is saying?

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Our passage from 1 Corinthians talks a lot about spiritual gifts and about how these gifts all proceed from the same Spirit. It's tempting to focus on the gifts mentioned—prophecy, knowledge, wisdom, healing, miracles, tongues, interpretation of tongues.

Paul wants the early church to know that there aren't a whole bunch of competing spirits offering different gifts to different people in the church, but *one* Spirit enabling *one* body to do God's will in the world.

That's the point. One God, one Spirit, one Giver of Gifts to one church.

Indeed, if we read on 1 Corinthians 12 and into 13, Paul will say that the believers shouldn't be focusing on all of the more exotic gifts (which some of them were), and they *certainly* shouldn't be seeking gifts that draw attention to themselves (which some of them were), but on those that build up the entire church.

And, of course, in chapter 13 Paul finishes the whole section on spiritual gifts by saying that without love, all of these gifts are nothing more than a noisy, resounding gong.

But I want to focus on the very first part of the reading.

*No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3b).*

**The Holy Spirit allows us to say, "Jesus is Lord."** It's important to be clear about what this means.

In the first century, "Jesus is Lord" is not a statement about the divinity of Christ, although the early Christians certainly believed this.

It is not a statement about the superiority of the Christian religion in a marketplace of other religions. This is an interpretation that we might assume in *our* cultural context.

In that context, "Lord" was a political term. It was used to refer to Roman Emperors who insisted on being called "Lord" (Caesar is Lord).

Christians were often persecuted not because they believed in God or gods while others did not; the emperor didn't really care what they believed about Jesus in the privacy of their own minds

The issue was allegiance. Saying, "Caesar is Lord" was a way of declaring your allegiance to the empire and its methods.

In a similar way, saying Jesus is Lord, was a way of declaring your allegiance to Jesus and his methods. It was a highly subversive claim.

So the first thing that the Holy Spirit says, the first thing that the Holy Spirit enables *us* to say, is, "Jesus is Lord."

The Spirit's role is to draw us to Christ, to transfer our allegiance to his upside down kingdom where last are first and first are last, where enemies are loved rather than destroyed, where walls between hostile groups are broken down, where the love of God extends beyond assumed boundaries.

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In the short reading from John, Jesus says, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me."

We live in thirsty times, don't we?

Advertising preys on this in countless ways. Everyone is trying to sell us something to quench our thirst. There's always a product that is going to make us fitter, cooler, more satisfied and happy.

There's always an experience or a trip to some exotic location that will fulfill us. The life we've been looking for is always just a credit-card swipe away.

Billions of dollars are poured into the entertainment industry to give us a few moments of escape from the deeper questions about life and death and the meaning of it all that never go away.

We click around social media restlessly comparing ourselves to others, hungry for acceptance and affirmation.

We chase after fulfillment in a string of relationships, sometimes leaving a trail of wreckage in our wake.

We search for escape from the difficulties of life in substance abuse.

We are thirsty.

We chase after all kinds of things that we think might meet our deepest longings for acceptance, healing, wholeness, forgiveness, hope, joy. But none of them are up to the task.

And Jesus says, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me..."

When we hear Jesus' words, our ears are primed for something like Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well three chapters earlier in John 4. We expect to hear something like, "whoever comes to me will never thirst." We expect to hear Jesus describe himself as the source and spring of living water. And he does.

But then we get something a bit different.

He says that for those who come to him, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."

*Out of the believer's heart...*

**The Spirit's role is to make *us* a source of life to those around us.**

I love how one commentator put it:

The shock of the Christian life is that the glorified Jesus has once again, through the Spirit, become flesh in the lives of believers, and the result is not that Jesus has become confined in the small space of believers' hearts, but that the lives of believers have become like his—large and life giving, “rivers of living waters.”<sup>1</sup>

So, to summarize on this Pentecost 2017, what does the Spirit say?

1. The Spirit says that Jesus is Lord—an incredible thing to say! And it enables us to say the same.
2. The Spirit says that all of the spiritual gifts are given by the same Spirit and that they are given for the benefit of the whole bod (not for the exaltation of the individual).
3. The Spirit declares, with Christ, that that it is the source of living water for all who are thirsty and for all of the ways we are thirsty.

And the Spirit says that once we have tasted this living water, our lives will merge with Christ's and we will become sources of life for the world around us.

Thanks be to God.



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<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, “Homiletical Perspective on John 7:37-39” in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Vol. B* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 25.