

Romans 8: 22-27 "What Kind of Spirit Do You Have?" Rev. Janet Chapman 5/23/21

The word "spirit" is often used to describe things which are meant to get you to your feet cheering like school spirit, team spirit, American spirit, the Christmas spirit, the Holy Spirit. Spirit is highly contagious. When someone is very excited, very happy or sad, you can catch it from them as easily as measles or a yawn. You can catch it from what they say or do, or just from what happens to the air of a room when they enter it. Groups of people also have a spirit, as anybody can testify who has ever been caught up in the spirit of a football or baseball game, a political rally, or even a lynch mob. Spirit can be good or bad, healing or destructive. However, cheering for a team is far easier than cheering for the Holy Spirit. We just aren't sure what to make of the Holy Spirit. That is probably because at one time or another, we have had someone judge us because we weren't "spiritual" enough in their mind. When we focused on the gifts of the Holy Spirit during Lent, there were a few who questioned whether we were going to ask people to speak in tongues, perform healings, or try to give prophecies? Possessing the Holy Spirit is so often identified with portraying special powers or insight that it can make us uneasy. Whereas Christmas, Lent, and Easter don't threaten our sensibilities, the celebration of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit, can cause us to hold our breath and brace for impact. So on this Pentecost Sunday, we might rightly question if we don't possess special powers from the Spirit, then just what kind of Spirit is it that we have received?

To understand that question, we must go back to the language of S/spirit. Like its counterparts in Hebrew and Greek, the Latin word "spiritus" originally meant breath as in expire, respiratory, etc. Breath is what you have when you're alive and don't have when you are dead. Thus, spirit equals breath equals life, that is, the aliveness and power of your life. To speak of a person's spirit, as we did at Jim Gould's memorial yesterday, is to speak of the power of life that is in him. When the spirit of a person is unusually strong, the life in them unusually alive, they can breathe it out into other lives, they can become literally in-spiring. As Frederick Buechner notes, God's Spirit is the power of the power of life itself; the Spirit has breathed, and continues to breathe, into God's creation and is highly contagious. When Peter and his friends were caught up in the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, everybody thought they were drunk, even though the sun was barely up. They were... on the Holy Spirit.

Paul tries to explain the Holy Spirit in Romans, chapter 8. His earlier chapters build a connection between sin and death but with this chapter, he ties the Holy Spirit and life. The Spirit undoes what sin and death have created. It brings in a new law that releases humanity from the laws of sin and death and ushers us a freedom of hopeful waiting. The Spirit doesn't take away the losses we experience but gives them new meaning and hope. This is portrayed in Raymond Carver's short story "A Small Good Thing." Ann and Howard Weiss had believed everything was right in the world as they prepared for their son Scotty's 8th birthday. Ann had already gone to the local bakery and ordered a special cake for her birthday boy. But before he could enjoy it, Scotty was tragically hit by a car while walking to school. Everything changed in the Weiss family as he is taken to the hospital and slips deeper and deeper into a coma. The author takes the reader into the pain and bondage of the Weisses' agony, an agony revealed in the words of Paul as they live with "groaning... and sighs too deep for words."

In Paul's writings, he navigates those choppy waters of now and the not yet, of the present time and the time when all that plagues the "children of God" will be conquered through "him who loved us." He acknowledges that in "hope we were saved." We hope for that which is not seen and, as Paul says, "we wait for it with patience." Or do we? Most of us know firsthand that we followers of Jesus do not often wait with "patience." In Carver's story, there is no patience. The baker is anxious for Scotty's birthday cake to be picked up and paid for; the Weisses are overwhelmed with anxiety as they hope for what they do not see in their coma-ridden young son; and the medical staff impatiently search for answers. All of the story's characters are hopeful, but none is patient. It occurs to me that describes most of us for the past 14 months – COVID pushed us to be hopeful, but very few of us found it easy to be patient. With all the problems we will continue to face in this world, sometimes the best we can do is groan and sigh and hope. We pray, often inarticulately, given the weight of our concerns, and when they overwhelm us, the Spirit is there to carry our burdens for us, interceding with God on our behalf.

I faced such a time in early 1993 with my first pregnancy. I was so excited I told everybody but at 9 weeks along, I suffered a miscarriage. I was heartbroken and a bit embarrassed to learn that 50% of first pregnancies don't make it past the first trimester – if I

had known, I wouldn't have told the world so quickly. Friends supported me but the hole in my heart was huge and I did a lot of talking, a lot of shouting with God – what good was doing what God wanted you to do if things like this could happen? Looking for something to distract me, I found a book at Barnes N Noble with stories of consolation. I started reading under the section entitled “Death” and there was a story from Joyce Landorf, a well known conservative evangelical author ranked along with the likes of Billy Graham, Dobson, Swindoll, and Colson in those days. She wrote about the deep sorrow she endured when her 3rd child died the day after he was born. She wrote, “There was one elderly minister, known as Pop Warner, who visited me in the hospital and was able to bring comfort as no one else was able to do so.” I shook my head, I must be delusional or seeing things, so I went back and reread the sentence. One elderly minister known as Pop Warner... my dad's father, minister in Salem, where Landorf had been leading a West Coast conference at the time. How could it be that no one in the Warner family had ever heard this story? You would think my Grandpa ministering to the female equivalent of Billy Graham would have been spoken of at some time? Landorf continued on, “That dear man stood and listened as I poured out my anguished heart. He didn't offer any advice, lecture, or words, although he was more than capable. He didn't busy himself with taking out wilted flowers beside my bed. He simply listened. He looked me directly in the eye and heard my heart as I told him how badly it was going with me. When I'd finally said everything I so desperately needed to say, he bent over my bed and prayed, ‘O Lord, you are here and You've heard all that Joyce said, Now, You know the way to heal her heart. Heal her quickly, Lord, and bind up her wounds – we need her.’ And then, knowing it was hard for me to believe my baby was really dead, he gently helped me take my first tottering steps toward acceptance by adding, ‘And dear Lord, take loving care of that precious baby for Joyce.’” At that very moment, I knew there was a Spirit interceding on my behalf when my groans and sighs were too heavy to bear.

I realized in those moments that it is when we finish talking that are prayers begin in earnest, because that is when we begin to listen. When all of our words run out, when we are scraping the bottom of our verbal barrels and all that is left are some inarticulate longings, some hungers beyond expression, that is when the Holy Spirit really gets to work, bearing those

pieces of our souls to God in a way that makes divine sense, and returning to us with good news that may be equally beyond expression. Raymond Carver's short story ends with Scotty's death and a vision of redemption that characterizes God's future. Scotty's grieving, anger-filled parents find hope, at least for a moment, from the baker who had been calling all afternoon requesting they pick up and pay for Scotty's cake. Learning of the tragedy, the baker apologizes and breaks open a rich, dark loaf of bread inviting them to join him. The parents partake of the rich, dark bread, and the baker tells them that eating is a "small good thing" in a time of groaning, in a time of "sighs too deep for words." The baker listens to their broken hearts... as the Spirit brings healing in the breaking of the bread. That is the kind of Spirit we have received, that is the kind of Spirit still speaking and working today. If we are listening, we cannot fail to eventually hear the good news, and be changed by the Spirit of Pentecost.