

The Spirit of Life

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Scripture

2 Corinthians 3:1-18

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by all, and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets that are human hearts.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are qualified of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our qualification is from God, who has made us qualified to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Now if the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses's face because of the glory of his face, a glory now set aside, how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, much more does the ministry of justification abound in glory! Indeed, what once had glory has in this respect lost its glory because of the greater glory, for if what was set aside came through glory, much more has the permanent come in glory!

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with complete frankness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, the same veil is still there; it is not unveiled since in Christ it is set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds, but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

Sermon

There's a scene in the film *American Beauty* that came to mind again this week. One that captures what it's like, I think, for the church to be moved by the Holy Spirit. *American Beauty* is a challenging film, from 1999. It's not everyone's cup of tea, I admit that. [1] "It's a story about emptiness." [2] The film describes two neighbors, two middle-class families with beautiful homes on a quiet suburban street somewhere in an ordinary suburb in the United States. Under the surface of modern luxury roils the struggle for meaning and connection with beauty. Each character in the story is suspicious of beauty and considers it a sham—each attempts to rise above the situation and each comes to a destructive end. The beauty in this film is not found in luxury or even in the beauty of a rose is grown by one of the characters, Anne—a rose that has no scent, which is a powerful image in itself. Rather, we get to see beauty through the lens of

the teenager next door, Ricky, who is obsessed with filming everything he sees not with an iPhone, but with video camera.

One day he allows his neighbor, the girl next door to look at one of his videos. In a lengthy shot, we see his video of a flimsy plastic bag—the kind many supermarkets now charge ten cents for because they’re bad for the environment. The bag is picked up by the wind and blown high and low among red autumn leaves. The moving and swirling of the bag and its beauty that suddenly, amid the foolishness and helplessness of the adults, this bag appears as a gift that these teenagers can look at together with sheer delight. It is this image that provides meaning and cohesion for them. As they watch the video together, the bag swirling and moving in the air, we hear Ricky say: “It was one of those days when it’s a minute away from snowing. And there’s this electricity in the air; you can almost hear it. Right? And this bag was just...dancing with me...like a little kid, begging me to play with it. For fifteen minutes. That’s the day I realized that there was this entire life behind things and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know that there was no reason to be afraid...ever.”

I remember when I first saw that scene back in 1999. It took my breath away. It was an experience of recognition. I said to myself, *That’s it. Yes. Exactly. That’s it, exactly. That’s the truth. Right there.* “Beauty breaks through in the presence of emptiness, a power that presents itself as benevolent.” [3] I have felt that incredibly benevolent force throughout my life. I have seen it, and I know you have seen it too. In this church, in countless people and situations. In this season of Pentecost, it’s good to be reminded that we, the church, exist to bear witness to this truth, this incredibly benevolent force, so that others, too, will see and feel and realize that benevolent power, presence, force, and that they, too, will know there’s no reason for us to be afraid, ever.

Paul loves to remind us that the Holy Spirit is alive within us. The Spirit is a force, a benevolent power moving through our lives, forming, reforming, and moving the church forward. The Spirit is a *personal* force, a person who reflects the face of the living Christ. The Spirit is always in service to the person of Christ and works to continue and extend the mission of Christ in the world. The Spirit fills our sails and calls us to life, a life marked by liberation and transformation. The Spirit is alive freeing God’s people. “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom.” *Always.* “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:17-18). And because the Spirit is about the work of liberation and transformation, this means that the church must always be open to change to something new. The new thing God is doing in our midst. For God is always the Lord of the new.

Over the weekend, the Session gathered for a leadership retreat to reflect upon who we are as a church post-COVID and to set aside time to be open to the movement of the Spirit.

Roy Howard, retired Presbyterian minister, former book editor for *The Presbyterian Outlook*, and now coach, consultant, and retreat leader, a good friend, encouraged us to open our sails and allow the Spirit to through move us. We studied scripture, passages in Acts and Ephesians; we look descriptions of the early church living on the other side of the trauma that was Christ’s death and resurrection and then the unleashing of the Spirit of Christ in the lives of God’s people, in community; modeling, embodying God’s love in a new way, serving one another with glad and generous hearts. Prior to the retreat, Roy asked us send in the name of a favorite song, one that reflects who we are, captures our values, hopes, and faith, and where we are in our lives. We sent the songs to Michael, for his eyes only, and he put together a playlist, keeping track of the song title and elder. Roy played the song, and then we had to guess which

elder chose which song. We listened; then we guessed. Sometimes we were right on the mark; and other times we were really surprised. Then that elder had to shared why that song was chosen. It was powerful and moving. It was amazing. We learned a lot about each other. The songs filled the space between us. If you're curious about what the songs were, we have put together the CPC Session Spotify playlist will soon be available to listen to, and you will be to guess for yourself. There was a lot of laughter; we broke bread together over dinner on Friday and lunch on Saturday, followed by Communion outdoors in the pavilion.

We talked a lot about the Spirit in our time together. Roy asked us to compare and contrast the image of rowing boat and that of a sailing vessel, the church as row boat or the church as a sail boat. It's not a perfect metaphor, but I think it works. Think about it. Rowing requires a lot of strength, effort, and will or a sustained period of time to get to where you need to go. It's exhausting, particularly if we have to go long distances. Whether by yourself or with others, it's demanding, exhausting. Sailing is not easy, it requires skill and effort, but ultimately, it's about opening our sails, aligning ourselves with the wind, and allowing the force of the wind to fill the sails and take us the vessel where it needs to go, to take us where we need to go. Think about it, rowing is about “us,” it's about willpower, it's about all the things that we want and feel that we do, ought to do. Sailing is about being open to something, someone larger than ourselves who wants to fill our sails and then carry us where we need to, forward into the life of God to where God wants to take us. And that image is so freeing and gives us life because we know it's not all about us, about what have to do.

I was struck that in the closing worship service in in the pavilion, the wind started to pick up. We had the Communion elements on a small table, and David had to make sure the elements weren't swept off it. Around the time we sharing sharing the elements around the circle the wind picked up even more. And some of us commented that this is perfect weather for sailing. Fill our sails, filling us with life.

I love how John Calvin (1509-1564) described the Holy Spirit as a “fountain of life, a *fons vitae*, connecting us to the Risen Christ. Without the Spirit, John Calvin (1509-1564) insists, Christ is far removed from us, buried in the past, someone we view remotely, objectively, cold, a “fact” of history to be studied and learned about, taught, instead of one encountered, known, a present reality, Christ with us and for us and within us. Calvin insists, “It is only by his Spirit that he unites himself with us, and by the grace and power of the same Spirit we are made his members...”. Why? So that “we may mutually enjoy him.” [4]

“Through the Spirit, the Risen Christ extends his life and resurrection to us.

The Holy Spirit raises us from our own personal tombs of death and decay,
all where is dead or stuck or dying in us.

The Holy Spirit is power, fire, energy, vital and vitalizing.

The Holy Spirit is dynamic and moving, and swift.

Invisible, like the wind, a wind—sometimes gentle, sometimes playful, sometimes fierce—
but always good,

trying to bring us to life,

to animate our souls,

joining us to one another, forging us into new people,

moving our feet forward, sending us to where we sometimes don't wish to go,

crossing borders, breaking boundaries, breaching barriers, breaking taboos,

stretching us to get us to stretch out our hands and lives in service, mission, and witness,

causing our hearts through it all to beat faster with joy and love and grace, to give ourselves
away in love to the world.”

When the Holy Spirit gives life to us in all these ways, then we can say the Spirit is bringing life to the church, a church that God is trying to take some place, move some place, empowering us, and inspiring us even more to become God’s people.

We all know here in this room, that people love to say these days that the church is dying, the church is falling apart. Perhaps it is. There’s much about the Protestant Church of the past sixty years, if we were really honest, needs to die, needs changing. Not because it was bad, but because we’re in a different place and time. Sometimes we need that change. Sometimes there are things that need changing because there were things in the last sixty years—one hundred, one hundred fifty, two hundred years, when the service was not in service to the living Christ, the church was doing it’s own thing, “rowing,” going where it wanted to go, instead of being open to the Spirit. Some say Christianity is dying. I hear and read that all time. It’s a message doesn’t seem to connect with folks like it used to. It’s true. Change is inevitable; it’s natural. We can resist these changes—which the church loves to do—or we can open, open ourselves to where the Spirit wants to take us. The church is not dying. The church is changing. Christianity is not dying. Christianity is changing. And we get to be a part of it. This should be a point of celebration and gratitude. That we are alive in this time to be about this work that the Spirit is calling us to do. And the church is alive only because the Spirit makes it so.

So what if the massive changes we’re living through are merely birth pangs of something new being born by the Spirit, a sign that the Holy Spirit is at work in us, forming and reforming us, liberating and transforming us for what’s coming next?

Where is the Spirit at work within us? Now. Where are you, where are we coming alive?



Sources

- [1] *American Beauty*, written by Alan Ball and directed by Sam Mendes (DreamWorks Pictures, 1999). Watch the scene at youtu.be/gHxi-HSgNPc
- [2] For convenience, I am drawing heavily from Cornelis van der Kooi’s beautiful description of this scene at the beginning of his Warfield Lectures given at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2014. See *This Incredibly Benevolent Force: The Holy Spirit in Reformed Theology and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 1-2.

[3] Van der Kooi, 2. This scene becomes an entrée into the focus of his lectures and later book, offering a new Reformed vision of the Holy Spirit, what he calls a Spirit-Christology.

[4] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), II.i.3.