

“the gift of the Holy Spirit”
A Sermon for First Congregational Church
Camden, Maine
Sunday, May 6, 2018
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Acts 10:44-48 and John 15:9-17

While Peter was still speaking, **the Holy Spirit** fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that **the gift of the Holy Spirit** had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.
Acts 10:44-48

[Jesus said,] “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask of him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”
John 15:9-17

Will you pray with me. Surprising and all welcoming God, remind us this day of *our* place in *your* scheme of life. Help us to extend your invitation to wholeness to all those we meet. Help us to accept your word, your promise, that even we, even *we*, are included as members in your grace-filled household of love and forgiveness. Amen.

Here's the question for the day: Why are you a Christian?

Don't worry, I'm not going to call on any of you individually, or ask you to raise your hand if you consider yourself a Christian. But it's not a rhetorical question, it's a nuts and bolts question, a flesh and bones question -- why are you a Christian? I'll tell you my answer later, but for this moment I'll suggest a few reasons you might consider yourself a Christian....

Maybe it's because you *grew up in the church* and never left -- you went to Sunday school, you were confirmed in the faith as a teenager, maybe you went to church camp in your youth -- Pilgrim Lodge here in Maine, married in the church, had your children baptized in the church? And you've never left!

Maybe you *came back to the faith* after being away for quite awhile, and a birth, or a death, or a divorce, or some other monumental life event drew you back to God and Jesus in the Christian faith.

Maybe you *had a good friend* who was a faithful churchgoer, and just a really good person, who impacted your life in ways that changed you and drew you into the faith.... totally unexpectedly. That happened to me....

Maybe you came to the Christian faith *through AA*, Alcoholics Anonymous, or some other Christian based group who helped you find your way when you thought you were lost for good.

Maybe you came to the faith through *reading, or writing, or observing the birds....* and finally concluding there must be more to this life than our eyes can see.

And finally maybe it was something simple, yet profound that drew you to the Christian faith. I had a very good friend who went through the doctoral program with me at Bangor Theological Seminary, who was a Zen Buddhist priest and also a Christian. She was raised in the Catholic Church. Margaret and I spent a fair amount of time together in the doctoral program over three years. One day I asked her, "Margaret, how do you explain being a Buddhist and a Christian at the same time?" She smiled and looked at me with her beautiful blue eyes and said, "Susan, that's easy! I love Jesus!" Margaret died several years ago from esophageal cancer. I've never forgotten her answer to my question, and it has *become* the reason I am a Christian -- I love Jesus. That's all there is to it.

After eighteen plus years in ordained ministry, and loving almost all of it, I have to admit that now.... I can take or leave all the formal trappings of religion -- the manmade doctrines and dogma of the faith, church meetings, rules, bylaws, committees.... but the bottom line is -- I love Jesus. That's why I'm a Christian. That's why I'll always be a pastor.

It's something about Jesus' work, his ministry, his teaching and preaching, his healing, his forgiving of sins, his humanity, his *spirit*.... The Gospels tell us the Holy Spirit of God came down upon Jesus and anointed him to do good in the midst of evil, to heal in the midst of brokenness, to forgive in the midst of the unforgivable. To love at all cost.

In our texts for today from the Book of Acts and the Gospel of John, the power of the Holy Spirit and the two great commandments to love God and one another become central to the Christian message. We are to love God and one another, and to rely on the Holy Spirit to help us to live out those commandments.

It's tough, though, some days, isn't it? Especially that love of neighbor part. I don't know about you, but sometimes I don't feel like I love all my "neighbors," or even *want* to love very many of them! But these Bible stories keep calling me back home, reminding me to *keep trying* to love, to *keep trying* to forgive, even to *forget* sometimes, and to hang on to that Holy Spirit part of the Christian Trinity for dear life.

The Holy Spirit -- in our text from Acts this morning, "**the Holy Spirit** fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of **the Holy Spirit** had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received **the Holy Spirit** just as we have?'" (Acts 10:44-47)

I suppose you could say this of many stories from the Bible, but it seems particularly true today as we consider verses from the tenth chapter of Acts and the fifteenth chapter of John.... that God's word and work more often than not show up in the most unlikely places. Sometimes we miss the sightings of them altogether. If we *do* recognize them it's hard to believe there is anything greater than coincidence going on in their unfolding.

We didn't hear the whole story of Chapter 10 of Acts today, but I'll refresh your memories. It's an important story that revolves around Peter's involvement with Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian court -- he was a high level Roman soldier. Here is a government official, in charge of many people, who has probably everything money could buy in his day, who finds that wealth and power and status do not buy happiness....

Here is a person who steps out of his official government role to become "a devout man who feared God with all his household; [who] gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God," according to the first verses in the chapter of Acts we're considering today.

This chapter tells of Cornelius' conversion to being a follower of Jesus -- not just a "God-fearer" who is not a Jew, but a follower of the one who lived and died never giving up his quest

to let all people know one holy thing in the form of two commandments – that God is love and that love of neighbor is the most important action we can take in life.

Cornelius, the Roman centurion, gets it.... He comes to understand that life is more than one's work....

Life is more than professional status and power....

Life is listening to the working of God in one's daily affairs and paying attention to the direction that the Holy Spirit of God gives us in all our affairs.

Some people may not call what happens in their lives – to turn them around and toward a more sacred life – by the name of “God,” or “the Holy Spirit.” I certainly didn't for the first half of my life. But sooner or later most of us come to the conclusion that “Something” beyond ourselves.... “Something” beyond our human comprehension.... guides us, directs us, leads us hopefully not into temptation.... and does deliver us from whatever evils have surrounded us.

The story about Cornelius is one of my favorite stories in the Bible – Cornelius receives a vision that tells *him* to become involved with Peter. Peter has a vision that tells *him* to become involved with Cornelius. These two men, each separately, and then together, hear the voice of God.... pay attention to it.... act on it.... and open the door for those not of the Jewish tradition to become baptized followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

Peter asks, rhetorically I think, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10:47) And the answer is No.... no one can withhold the water of baptism from anyone who feels they have received the Holy Spirit.

It is the sacraments of the church that set us apart from other community organizations. It is the sacraments – the sacred rituals of the church – that remind us of who we are and whose we are. It is the sacraments of the church that call us to worship.

In our faith tradition there are two “official” sacraments.... holy communion usually once a month, and baptism when the Spirit leads a person or a parent to say, “I would like to be baptized,” or “I would like my children to be baptized.” We always say yes to that request. Or at least I did in eighteen years of ministry in Lincolnville. I can't imagine saying no. But the sacraments of the wider church are greater than those two, holy communion and baptism.

I read a piece a few years ago from the Washington Post that I've not forgotten. To me, it speaks of those broader sacraments. This article was written by a young “millennial,” Rachael Held Evans, a woman probably in her twenties or early thirties. Talk about the Holy Spirit speaking in a young voice! She writes, “If young people are looking for congregations that authentically practice the teachings of Jesus in an open and inclusive way, then the good news is the church already knows how to do that. The trick isn't to make church cool; it's to keep worship weird.

You can get a cup of coffee with your friends anywhere, but church is the only place you can get ashes smudged on your forehead as a reminder of your mortality.

You can be dazzled by a light show at a concert on any given weekend, but church is the only place that fills a sanctuary with candlelight and hymns on Christmas Eve.

You can snag all sorts of free swag for brand loyalty online, but church is the only place where you are named a beloved child of God with a cold plunge into the water, [or a gentle touch of water on your forehead].

You can share food with the hungry at any homeless shelter, but only the church teaches

that a shared meal brings us into the very presence of God.

[Evans continues] what finally brought me back, after years of running away, wasn't lattes or skinny jeans; it was the sacraments. Baptism, confession, Communion, preaching the Word, anointing the sick — you know, those strange rituals and traditions Christians have been practicing for the past 2,000 years. The sacraments are what make the church relevant, no matter the culture or era. They don't need to be repackaged or rebranded; they just need to be practiced, offered and explained in the context of a loving, authentic and inclusive community."¹ End of quote.

What makes us unique? The sacraments.... The human and divine leader Jesus of Nazareth.... The power of the Holy Spirit to remind us in so many ways we are of one family.... even on the days when we squabble over the details.... even when we can't stay awake in church.... even when we have a hard time loving our neighbor....

Perhaps coincidences are thrown into our paths each day to remind us there is no such thing as a coincidence, only experiences that could – if we would let them – cause us to turn around and remember we're not in charge, Some ONE, Some POWER is in charge way beyond our capacity to figure out on our own.... how to move forward, how to adapt to new situations, how to live and let live, how to love and be loved. I think of the Holy Spirit as the Creator of Coincidences in our lives.

The sacraments of our faith remind me that we are part of the holy family of God where all are welcome in the pool of life, all are blessed, all are worthy and cared for through the power of the Holy Spirit of God.

In sum, the Holy Spirit has our back. We're simply not on this path of faith alone. We are not stumbling around in the dark of life without anyone showing us the way forward. We just have to open our eyes and see.... and reach out and take a holy hand.... I love Jesus..... Do you? Let the people say, "Amen."

¹Rachel Held Evans, article in the Washington Post for April 30, 2015. She is the author of *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding Church*.