

Start With the Spirit

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“If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.” -- Galatians 5:25

Have you ever wondered why there are so few of us in here and so many of them out there? Even on our best Sundays, only 80 or so of us gather here for worship, which leaves roughly ten thousand of them out there in Richmond Heights. And that's not counting Lyndhurst, South Euclid, or Highland Heights.

I've often pointed out that difference in numbers to you for several reasons: as a statement of fact, as the historical confirmation of Jesus's words about the narrow gate, as a prediction of the future, and as an attempt to reassure you that it's okay to be outnumbered. The true church, which is both visible and invisible, is always going to be a minority population, no matter where it finds itself or when.

Leslie Huston and I were talking over dinner the other night about the Pilgrims. Now, I don't know what your dinner table conversation consists of -- “How was your day, honey? Oh, it was fine. How was yours?” that sort of thing is what I imagine for most of us most of the time – but on that particular evening, at Bob Evans' after the movie group, Leslie and I decided to talk turkey.

You may recall that there were a couple of documentaries about the Pilgrims that aired back around Thanksgiving, and one of the facts that was made abundantly clear was how grim life for those English colonists was, as they clung to the rocky coast of New England. That part of the story most of us know.

What many of us don't realize is that only half of those half-starved, half-dead colonists were separating Puritans – the folks we think of when we think of Pilgrims fleeing religious persecution in Old England for religious freedom in New England.

But the other 50 or so people who'd been aboard the *Mayflower* did not share the Pilgrims' religious convictions, if they had any religious convictions at all. The Pilgrims referred to them as Strangers – calling themselves Saints, naturally – and those Strangers had been recruited by the venture capitalists in London who'd funded the *Mayflower's* voyage. The *Mayflower* underwriters wanted those Strangers aboard the *Mayflower* for purely economic reasons: to better the odds that the new colony in northern Virginia – which is where they thought they were headed – would survive and turn a profit.

So, religiously speaking, the bag from which we draw our fundamental national myth was decidedly mixed. We were not founded by people seeking religious freedom – such noble souls were only a part of our national DNA, and fairly quickly became a vanishing part. Wave after wave of English settlers washed up on the coast of New England after the Pilgrims, and the vast majority of them wanted as little to do with religion here in America as they had wanted to do with it back home. They came for beaver pelts, cod, and herring, the natural resources on which they hoped to build their fortunes.

And a few of them did, and while some of those prospering New Englanders gave God the glory as well as the credit for their good fortune, many more drifted away from the strict adherence to the faith of their parents and grandparents. Already by 1702, Cotton Mather, the most famous of the vinegar-faced Boston divines, complained that

“Piety begat prosperity, and the daughter devoured the mother.” The members of Boston's burgeoning merchant class looked mostly after their own interests, ignoring the spiritual covenant that had held the Pilgrims together through those first precarious years, and if you packed every one of Boston's meetinghouses to the rafters, you'd be accounting for only a tiny fraction of that city's population.

So we who gather in places like this Sunday after Sunday are always going to be a minority, and that is exactly what Jesus told us to expect. He said that his true followers would be like salt and yeast, those scant ingredients that give lift and flavor to the flour and water. You don't need much of those to make a difference, but they do need to be different. “If salt has lost its savor,” Jesus asked rhetorically, “what good is it? It's good only to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.”

Jesus's true disciples are always going to stand out in a world that serves itself rather than God first and then others. They will stand out not because they talk about how spiritual-but-not-religious they are, but because of the way they manifest their self-professed spirituality in concrete actions.

Discipleship depends, in the first instance, not on thought, but on conviction, and conviction is a spiritual rather than an intellectual reality. People become true followers of Jesus not because of Jesus, but rather because of the Holy Spirit.

Let me say that again because it's confusing and important. People become true followers of Jesus not because of Jesus, but rather because of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that convinces us that the way of Jesus should be our way, that his is a way of life that we should both embrace, without reservation, and proclaim to the whole world.

Ordinary people, untouched by the grace of the Holy Spirit, are going to look at Jesus as a nice example, and follow his nice example, until they get to the troubling bits, and then the natural person – the person who lives according to desires of the flesh, in Paul's words from our second lesson – is going to balk.

Sell everything I have and give the proceeds to the poor? Forget it. Not keep my little handgun in the bedside table? No way. Love jihadists in any way except with a word? Not a chance. Jesus may have been able to do all of those things, but not me. No sir, no how, no way. I'm going to be a follower of Jesus on my terms, not his.

But to be a follower of Jesus that way is to be no follower of Jesus at all. You're following yourself, not him. You're simply following your own lights, your own dictates, your own sense of what's right and good and fair and reasonable. And for none of that do you need the Holy Spirit. You can work through the ethical decisions that confront us all on your own or with the help of a few friends, a trusted moral advisor, and a good book or two.

But to take the next step – to step from following Jesus as a moral code to following Jesus as an act of faith – that requires the Holy Spirit. To follow Jesus by losing ourselves to find ourselves – that's not a moral code, that's not being a nice person, that's surrendering our lives to the leading and power of the Holy Spirit. And to follow Jesus that way – convinced that we find our lives by losing them – is completely unreasonable, illogical, and, to the vast majority of people, incomprehensible. And that's why you can't think your way into true discipleship.

In the world's calculus, you don't receive by giving; you receive by taking. In the world's warfare, you don't win by surrender; you win by crushing and defeating. And in the world's economy, you don't succeed by providing for the most vulnerable free of charge; you succeed by advancing self-interest and out-manuevering the competition.

The values of the Christian faith look very different from the values of the business-as-usual world, because those Christian values – if they genuinely are Christian – are shaped, driven, and given all their meaning and significance by the Spirit rather than the

flesh, and it is the flesh that makes sense to us, as it has done and always will do for the vast majority of people for all time.

And that's why, to take a very current example, the rhetoric of guns-everywhere and guns-for-everyone continues to find such a receptive audience. People of flesh and blood want to protect that flesh and blood – that's natural and reasonable – and to suggest that Jesus calls us to forgo that perfectly natural and reasonable interest in order to embody his undying life of self-sacrificial love is to ask the impossible of worldly people. We're simply too afraid of the bad guys and too attached to the world of flesh and blood. We're willing to be followers of Jesus, but we're not willing to be martyrs for Jesus. No sir, no how, no way.

And so we Christians go on looking very much like flour and water instead of yeast and salt, and the world continues to stumble along in darkness without the light we Christians could and should be providing.

Gun sales soared after President Obama's most recent call for tighter restrictions on gun sales, repeating a pattern that's become depressingly familiar: some nut case shoots up a bunch of people, the president or some other prominent politician calls for tighter controls on the availability of weapons, and people race to the gun store. Brian Rutenbur, a financial analyst for the weapons industry, was quoted in last Monday's *New York Times* as saying, "President Obama has actually been the best salesman for firearms." (1/4/16)

I wonder if Kathy Lorentz's letter to the PD last Sunday will have people running to Gander Mountain after she pointed out the hypocrisy of the PD running ads for assault-type weapons while they editorialize against gun violence. If you didn't see Kathy's letter, it's up on the bulletin board across from the church office.

Guns are destroying machines, it's as simple as that. That's all they are and that's all they're intended by their makers to do, and those of us who worship the creator and not the destroyer need to get in Christian America's face with this rather obvious fact.

We are Christians, you and I, and we claim that identity – in theory and theology, at least – because of the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It is that Spirit, that claimed Jesus at his baptism, that lays claim to all of us at our own baptism. We are adopted as sons and daughters of God by a Spirit – as Paul says in Romans – not of slavery to fall back into fear, but rather a Spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those are the fruit of the Spirit of the God we're supposed to be following, and where, in any of that, do you hear self-defense, stand your ground, shoot first and ask questions later?

We liberal Christians have erred grievously in not recognizing the enormous gulf that separates the culture with which we have become much too friendly from the realm of God which was what Jesus preached, lived, died for, and was raised for. Life in that realm is characterized not by the spirit of fear and anger that has taken us captive – along with the terrorists, survivalists, and demagogues – but rather life in God's realm is characterized by that list of spiritual gifts that has nothing whatsoever to do with guns, bombs, clubs, or knives. We trivialize and undermine the gospel of Jesus Christ when we accommodate his radical demands for peace with justice to our violent-as-usual world.

I can't say that Judaism is wrong or that Buddhism or Islam or Hinduism are wrong. But I can say, with complete certainty, that Christianity is wrong – and the Christians practicing it are wrong – when you can't distinguish us from Everyman or Everywoman. The fruits of the spirit of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ are as different from the fruits of free-market capitalism and the military-industrial complex as chalk is from cheese.

Those who are genuinely guided by the Spirit should stick out, not in that prissy,

obnoxious, moralizing, finger-wagging, tongue-clucking, joyless censoriousness that denies the goodness of creation, but rather in the abundant-life-affirming way that is the hallmark of a follower of Jesus.

The Spirit doesn't guide us away from life, it guides us away from the flesh, as Paul says it does, and from the passions and fits of self-destruction that characterize the flesh. If you want to know what life in the flesh looks and sounds like, listen to rant radio and the folks who say that the more we surround ourselves with violence, the safer we'll be. That's the world of the flesh talking.

I want to close this sermon about living in the Spirit by lifting up, again, the members of our Ministry Leadership Council, whom we installed earlier in the service. Write their names down on your order of service and inscribe them on your heart: Jim Christensen, Carol Cover, Scott Dorey, Kaye Gardiner, Kelly Holtz, Phil Juarez, Mike Nedrow, Kimberly Whitney, Chris Wilkinson, Gail Yusko, and me. Inscribe those names on your heart so that you can pray for them every day for the coming year. Pray not that they will make decisions for our church with which you'll agree. Pray instead that they will manifest, in all their doings, the fruits of that Spirit that was in – and was – Christ Jesus: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

As we start a new year together, with new leaders, new challenges, and new opportunities, let's start it off right. Let's start with the Spirit.