

8.13.20 Being Open to the Spirit Romans 8.26-39, The Gospel of John 16.7-15

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In July of 2022 when I shared with the Leadership Council about taking a sabbatical this year, Jill and I had a few things we planned to do, including Jill taking a leave of absence from her job in June so we could have a month off together and hopefully take a trip overseas. After the church graciously granted me a sabbatical in 2023, our life started changing and so did our expectations and plans. Jill had back surgery in January and missed six weeks of work as she recovered which meant she wouldn't be taking another month away from work in June. Going far away also became less appealing when our son Nathan and his wife Zoe shared they'd be having a baby in April. When my father arrived at the end of June and shared his cancer diagnosis with us, that dramatically changed the last month of my sabbatical. Spending as much time as possible with my dad became the priority. We were planning a wonderful family time next weekend with our son Greg preaching at BBC and his wife Marci playing the prelude with my dad here to be a part of it all before he returned to Seattle on August 22nd. But my dad moved up his flight and is leaving tomorrow. When I picked my theme and scripture back in June, I hadn't planned to preach about a passage from John where Jesus is getting ready to leave his disciples having just spent three days with my dad and not knowing when, or if, I'll see him again. Sometimes changes in plans are more difficult than others and we have to look harder for the Spirit's presence with us. But Paul says the Spirit helps us in our weakness so I'm counting on that help today.

What we experienced over the last year and the last seven weeks is typical and not an exception. Many of us have had to adjust future plans based on changes that we didn't want or anticipate. You can make plans and have hopes and expectations, but you also need to learn to be open to the Spirit and to adapt to the unexpected and the unanticipated, while releasing some of your hopes and plans to walk into new realities. The last two Sundays I've shared reflections from my sabbatical –noticing God in everything and becoming more like Jesus. Today I'm going to share about **being open to the Spirit. Being open to the Spirit requires three things: Believing there is a Holy Spirit, Being Open to the Spirit, and Being Guided by the Spirit.**

In the last week of Jesus' life as given in John's Gospel, the disciples have to adjust their plans, hopes, and expectations, and be open to the Spirit and to new things they didn't necessarily want to go through. Listen to what Jesus tells them in **The Gospel of John 16:7-15**, 7 Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, **the Advocate will not come to you**; but if I go, **I will send him to you**. 8 And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: 9 about sin, because they do not believe in me; 10 about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; 11 about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

12 "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. 13 When **the Spirit of truth** comes, **he will guide you into all the truth**; for he will not speak on his own, but **will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come**. 14 He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. 15 All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

The first step to being open to the Spirit is believing the Spirit exists. If someone asked you, **"Who is the Spirit?"** how would you answer that question? In John's Gospel, (see 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:7-11;13-15), Jesus promises his disciples that when he departs he will send them the Spirit who is the Advocate, Counselor, Comforter, and Spirit of Truth to remain with them and guide them. The shading of those different words tells us about who the Spirit is and what the Spirit does. The Spirit is an advocate for us. **An Advocate** speaks up for someone, defends them, argues their case, and provides support. **A Counselor** listens deeply so someone feels heard and can share wise advice when requested. **A Comforter** is someone who is kind, caring, and insightful and knows what to say and what not to say to someone who is hurting, in pain, or grieving. Finally, **the Spirit of Truth** will guide us in the way of truth, so we're not easily deceived by those who are opposed to the teaching of Christ and the good will of God. The Spirit is and does all these things.

Jesus sends the Spirit to help you and all his followers. Do you believe that God has provided you with an Advocate, Counselor, Comforter, and Spirit of Truth? Can you

imagine Jesus and God the Father making the Spirit available to do all these things, and people saying, *“No, thanks, I’m good. I’m managing my life fine. I don’t need any help.”* Truly, what are we thinking, what are we doing, what help are we missing out on when we fail to believe that God has provided the Spirit as our Advocate, Counselor, Comforter, and to guide us into all truth? I pray you will believe that this Spirit of God is real and is available to do and be all these things for you. I’ve received enough guidance, comfort, and direction in my life and even in the constant re-shaping of my sabbatical plans to know the Spirit is real and does all these things Jesus says.

Once you believe the Spirit is real, the next step is **being open to the Spirit**. It’s one thing to say, *“I believe there’s a Holy Spirit.”* It’s another thing to be open to the Spirit in your life on a daily basis, including some of the more painful experiences of life such as a physical challenge or the loss of a loved one. **Being open to the Spirit includes being open to God touching your life or speaking to you in ways or experiences that may be new or not what you prefer or are used to.**

In the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit shows up and causes people to do things, say things, and go places they never would have, except they were open to and obedient to the Spirit. We don’t want to fall into a routine where we think we can only experience God in ways that we’re familiar with, like or prefer. During my sabbatical, we visited many different churches of various denominations or affiliations in Massachusetts, Maine, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and Georgia. We attended churches that are very contemporary in their architecture and music, and we attended churches that are very traditional in every respect. One church had a bulletin with more than seven pages of liturgy and three churches had no bulletin at all. We worshiped at the largest church in Maine, Eastpoint Church in South Portland, and one of the largest churches in the country, North Point Community Church in Alpharetta, Georgia. It’s interesting to see how different individuals and churches have sought to be open to the Spirit as they’ve tried to live out the Christian faith and share the good news of God’s love in Christ.

Our trip in May which was a highlight of my sabbatical came about because Jill and I both discerned we weren’t supposed to go to Europe as we originally thought we would, and we prayerfully considered alternatives. The same week in May that we

attended North Point Church, we spent two nights at Koinonia Farm in Americus, GA which was founded in 1942 by Clarence and Florence Jordan and Martin and Mabel England. The Englands, like our guests today Jonathan and Amanda Good, were ABC Missionaries. Koinonia Farm was to be an intentional community of believers sharing their lives and resources, following the example of the first Christian communities as described in the Acts of the Apostles. Because of their commitment to equal rights and justice, Koinonia Farm persevered through bombs, bullets, and boycotts during the height of the Civil Rights struggle and also birthed Habitat for Humanity. The community at Koinonia is small now and supports itself largely through selling food products including all kinds of things with pecans. Jill and I think it would be a good place for a mission trip. At Northpoint Church we worshiped with several thousand people. At Koinonia Farm for daily morning worship there were five of us. Yet we could sense the Spirit of God at Northpoint and Koinonia and in all the different places we worshiped. If you're open to the Spirit, God may surprise you and touch you in ways you don't expect, whether that's in worship or simply going about the routines of your day or facing whatever challenge that lies before you or within you.

Believing in and being open to the Spirit are two steps, but a third step is the most important, that's **being guided by the Spirit**. You can believe there's a Spirit of God, **but not be open to being influenced by the Spirit**. You can be open to the Spirit, but that doesn't mean you'll be **obedient to the Spirit's guidance**. One of the most important ministries of the Spirit is to provide **guidance** in our lives. Especially when facing important decisions, we're wise to pray and ask the Spirit for direction, wisdom, and insight. We often will discern the Spirit's leading in an intuitive sense, a word spoken by a friend, in a passage of scripture, the opening or closing of a door of opportunity or even in a dream. In all decisions we test the Spirit by examining the Scriptures and seeking the counsel of trusted spiritually mature friends to make sure we're hearing correctly.

If you're guided by the Spirit that will shape your character, **who you are**, and **what you do**. **Galatians 5:22-25** shares the fruit of the Spirit which are a mark of spiritual maturity. *"By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is **love, joy, peace, patience,***

kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.” That’s the key, **“If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.”**

The fruit of the Spirit relate to guiding the development of our character.

They are virtues, aspects of love in action that all followers of Jesus are to grow in as the Holy Spirit works in our lives. We’re the ground, the soil, that the Holy Spirit works in and on to grow the fruit of the Spirit. God will not instantly make us more loving, patient, or generous. However, the Lord may put us in contact with people who need love every day. God may allow us to be in situations in which we can develop patience. We all have opportunities to be generous every day. It’s in circumstances that we find it most difficult to practice them in which we most need to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit. I encourage you to reflect on which one or two of the fruit of the Spirit does the Lord want you most to work on in this time of your life? Which ones need the most attention? Guided by the Spirit all disciples are to develop all the fruit of the Spirit.

Another aspect of being guided by the Spirit is discovering and using the gifts the Spirit has given us. The gifts of the Spirit are about doing. Every believer is empowered by the Spirit with spiritual gifts that are God given and they indicate what we do when we serve as Paul states in **1 Corinthians 12:4-7**, *“Now there are varieties of gifts, but **the same Spirit**; 5 and there are varieties of services, but the **same Lord**; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the **same God** who activates all of them in everyone. 7 **To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.**”*

Paul was writing to a church in Corinth that was divided into several factions with too many individuals who were thinking of themselves or aligning with one leader rather than being committed to the church as a whole. One of the goals of his letter to the Corinthians was to help them understand that although each individual is unique and there are many different spiritual gifts, all the gifts of the Spirit come from one and the same Spirit and they’re **to be used for the common good**. For years our church has emphasized the importance of each member serving the Lord, the church, and God’s

people through the use of our spiritual gifts for the common good. **Both the fruit of the Spirit and spiritual gifts are important in a balanced spiritual life that's guided by the Spirit and glorifies God.** While all of us are to cultivate all the fruit of the Spirit, when it comes to spiritual gifts, we only receive a few which we're to develop and use to the best of our ability.

The Spirit gives us the power to live our life as God intends as a follower of Jesus. The Spirit is our Advocate, Counselor, Comforter, and will guide us into all truth. In order for the Holy Spirit guide your life, first, you have to believe there is a Holy Spirit and you need to ask the Spirit to enter your life. In **Luke 11:13** Jesus says, *"If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, **how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!**"* Having received the Spirit, you need to commit yourself to **allowing the Spirit of God to guide** every aspect of your character and your life and when you do, you'll find yourself becoming more like Jesus as the months and years go by.

Prayer: Lord, help us to give you control of our life. Help us to trust you and to surrender our will to yours. Fill us and guide us with your Spirit today and every day so that our lives will demonstrate your presence and power and all the fruit of the Spirit, in Jesus' name. Amen

Blessing: *If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Galatians 5:25*

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. If someone asked you, *"Who is the Holy Spirit?"* how would you answer that question?
2. In John 16:7-15, what does Jesus tell us about the Holy Spirit?
3. Why is being open to the Spirit important for a believer?
4. What role does the Holy Spirit play in helping us develop the fruit of Christian character?
5. What role does the Holy Spirit have in equipping us for ministry?
6. Identify one step you can take to grow in your openness to and empowerment by the Spirit.