

Keeping in Step with the Spirit

Numbers 11: 23-30

Galatians 5: 13-18, 22-25

The time is approaching for me. The fateful day is only three months away when I will officially retire as an active Presbyterian minister and begin collecting my little pension. To facilitate a transition in the pastoral leadership here in Fairfield, I expect I will conclude here in a matter of weeks, likely sometime in July, as Pastor Bea Newhart transitions into the leadership role going forward.

There are lots of changes coming along for us. Next week, we will resume in-person worship in a very different mode of operation, but retaining the same worship that we had been doing in March when in-person services were suspended and I started producing a video here in my kitchen. Bulletin, hymnals, and Bibles will be gone as we remove objects that can be touched, where virus can be harboring, and start using a projector and screen for the order and elements of worship. When we gather on June 7, everyone will need to wear a mask, a good mask that passes the match test

We are still the same little church struggling to get by, but the faces will be different - masked for one thing - and the way we do things will be different. And Pastor Bea will have things that she will want to do differently as she progresses in the transition. We aren't *really* going back to anything like it was before when we resume in-person worship on June 7. Things are going to be changing in a variety of ways for us for a while, and we will need to keep in step with where the Spirit is leading us.

As we've worked our way through Jesus's post-resurrection appearances and his promises of the Holy Spirit in one form or another, the day has come when the Holy Spirit bursts upon the disciples in the upper room. Seven weeks after the Feast – 7 times 7, on the day after comes Pentecost – the fiftieth day ($7 \times 7 + 1 = 50$). The wild scene at Pentecost in the upper room is described in vivid detail in Acts 2, and you should be familiar with that passage.

Yet we also know that the Holy Spirit has been around since the beginning, having been mentioned in the Creation story in Genesis 1. And the Holy Spirit made other appearances in the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament. One memorable occasion was in Numbers 11 (yes, there are things in the book of Numbers besides numbers and genealogies).

We come to this passage and find a frustrated Moses once again. He has just finished belly-aching to God about his mission. Moses is over these insufferable, whiny people whom God has put in his charge. Moses believes that if these cranky weenies had *all* that they wanted, they'd *still* complain that it wasn't enough. They have the manna, but they remember having fish back in Egypt. Moses must be thinking, "Right, you people want fish in the middle of the desert."

Moses needs help to deal with this cantankerous group of sojourners. He literally cries out to God, ‘What have I done to deserve this? Please, just go ahead and kill me now.’

We begin our selection with God’s reply to Moses: *Is the Lord’s arm too short?* God is prepping Moses for a bit of a show. God doesn’t have short arms.

Moses does as he is told and brings the elders to the Tent, the tabernacle – their mobile worship center.

As the presence of the Lord comes down in a cloud, Moses is somehow able to take the Spirit of God from himself and place it on the seventy elders present. The result is that the elders began prophesying. We don’t know exactly *what* such prophesying means here in the Old Testament any more than we know **exactly** what happened at Pentecost when a similar thing may have happened. In any case, the 70 are put in an exceptional spiritual state. It happened only this one time.

Now, you will note that 70 is an unusual number because it lacks numeric symbolism. It would be much better if the number were a factor of twelve, like the twelve tribes of Israel and that sort of thing. Well, then we discover that 2 of the elders **didn’t** go to the tent of meeting, the tabernacle. They didn’t get the memo. Maybe they misunderstood social distancing. Anyway, now it makes sense – there were supposed to be **72** elders there in the tabernacle.

The center of attention now turns to the 2 absentee elders. Moses’ act to place the Spirit on the elders somehow escaped outside the tent and even reached the 2 missing elders, Medad and Eldad, sitting and chatting at a table at the Manna Diner. God is something else, right? These two guys begin prophesying much to the surprise of a young observer who runs over to Moses and Joshua, Joshua being Moses’ right-hand guy. This observer tells them about it, and Joshua is appalled. Joshua urges Moses to stop them from prophesying. Moses dismisses his complaint by saying that he wished **all** of God’s people were prophesying, and that was the end of the matter.

Even if Moses didn’t realize that he was missing two of the elders, the Spirit of God knew what was going on and covered Moses’ intention by finding the ones who were readily identifiable as elders and making sure that the Spirit came upon them, too. The elders may not have kept up with Moses’ instructions, but the Spirit knew who they were and where to find them and got them up to speed, prophesying like all the other elders.

In this case, the Spirit comes to those designated by God and Moses for service to God’s will and purpose. There is no omission and there is no mistake. Having attained roles of service, acknowledged as elders by their faith commitment, the Spirit comes upon them and anoints them in power and authority. I simply wish we actually knew what was happening when they prophesied.

That's what we really want to understand: what happens when the Spirit comes to the faithful? We can share in the amazing imagery of Pentecost from Acts, but I'm willing to wager that none of us has quite experienced that happening to us: a massive windstorm, something like tongues of fire on each disciple, and the spontaneous utterance of a foreign language, or whatever prophesying means. Yet we would also most likely acknowledge sensing the presence of God's Spirit around us or around others at some time or other, even though we never had such a breathtaking event in our lives to announce the presence of the Spirit upon us or with us.

To take a different approach, I thought we could turn to Paul. He talks about the gifts of the Spirit in First Corinthians chapter 12. It's helpful, but Paul is really addressing a divisive matter in the congregation of Jesus people at Corinth. He isn't exactly addressing the effects of the Spirit on the faithful individual.

There is another place where Paul talks about the Spirit: in his letter to the churches in Galatia in chapter 5.

You may recall that this is Paul's hot letter; he's hopping mad because Peter arrives and quickly makes a mess of things. Peter seems to suggest that you need to be a good Jew in order to follow Jesus. Paul will have none of that, and blasts off this letter.

By chapter 5, he seems to have gotten the anger out of the way, and his language takes a less irritated and more focused tone. Paul is still upset to think that the Galatians have been turned toward Judaism and the Torah-Law, but he is making his case now.

Let's remember that, when Paul talks about sinfulness, he is talking about the problem with practicing Jewish Torah-Law. All the Law can do is point out and produce an endless cycle of sinfulness. Human efforts seek to establish their own righteousness by right performance of the Law. However, since righteousness is inevitably undone by sinfulness, and one cannot create one's own righteousness.

Therefore, Paul urges the Galatians to live in the freedom that they've obtained by their faith in Jesus, their freedom from the Torah-Law as well as freedom from the lives they had lived before their profession of faith in Jesus. He emphasizes love for one another as needing to be the priority in their conduct as a community of faithful witnesses. Quoting Leviticus as Jesus did, Paul says, *The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'*

He urges them to "live by the Spirit." After detailing all of the sinfulness of the worldly nature, sins of the flesh and selfish conceit, Paul then enumerates the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit.

Number one is love, following up the emphasis he laid out previously. To be in Christ is to be embraced by the love of God, the love of the Lord, and empowered in love by the Spirit to be loving to all.

Joy and peace describe the state of mind of the person in the Spirit. In this, a person knows their blessings and their source, bringing them a ready state of joy. In joy and in love, they are anchored in peace. They're unencumbered by conflicts, misgivings, doubts, and fears, able to maintain peace in their life experience.

Love, joy, and peace are a natural foundation, it seems to me. But what comes next?

Patience. Love, joy, and peace in the Spirit bring a release from urgency, from the need to control, from the demands of the self for gratification and satisfaction. Patience allows space for God and the Spirit to work, not insisting on having things my way or according to my schedule and determination. Behind patience lies a certain measure of humility.

Kindness and goodness reflect a generosity in personal spirit as the Spirit of God provides assurance, direction, and a consideration for others.

Faithfulness – ever seeking to remain true to God, for the presence of the Spirit of God is a ready reminder of who it is that you serve and who has blessed your life in the Lord.

Gentleness and self-control reflect the awareness in the Spirit that is restrained, sensitive, and tries not to overpower or control or take advantage.

Paul has compiled the essentials and holds up a mirror for the Galatians who have become confused, distracted, and divided over how to live a faithful life as servants of the Lord and his Kingdom. Paul tries to get them in step with the Spirit, away from the worldly ways that have provoked discord, enmity, and self-serving ambitions. He brings them to the fruits of the Spirit, something far more desirable than what they've received from remaining wedded to the ways of the world.

In the same manner, the ways of the Lord in the empowerment of the Spirit are presented to us. Love, joy, and peace. Patience, kindness, and goodness. Faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As Paul says to them and to us: *Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*

As I often remind you, the Spirit is out in front, waiting for us to catch up, to keep in step, and claim our new life as Spirit-powered servants of the Kingdom.