

The Spiritual Life in Community

May 15, 2011

Scripture: John 10:1-10

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.

I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Acts 2:37-47

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Proclamation of the Word

Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren (and sistern) to live together in unity! (Psalm 133:1)

Isn't that lovely? This is my image of the ideal church. It is a place where we live out the wonderful life of the Spirit together in community and in unity. Sometimes I look at the church and wonder where is that good and pleasant unity?

I was once on a quest for the perfect, ideal church.

In Seminary a few of us decided we would create the perfect church. So guess where we started. We read the book of Acts. It was so of like the book, *The Year of Living Biblically*, where the author tried to abide by every

biblical statute from foregoing shellfish to not wearing clothes made from two different fibers. We tried to live out the early church in our day and time. We committed to coming together weekly to break bread in the form of our brown bag lunch. We sang as best we could to my guitar playing. We read through Acts and we prayed. There were three couples involved and our preaching professor Chuck. We went to Washington, DC to learn from the Sojourners community and the Church of the Savior to learn how they lived out God's call to worship and do mission in their own backyards. We were going to live the radical gospel in intentional community.

That same year my mother was undergoing chemo for breast cancer, and I was pregnant with our first child. Ashley was living with her husband Rob's mental illness. Brent was struggling with call as they awaited the birth of their first child and were trying to decide whether to move back to Texas to be near family. We laughed lots, we prayed, we cried together, we studied. We decided to form a house church when we got out of Seminary right there in Atlanta. We might move into the same neighborhood, meet weekly and invite our neighbors for worship and a meal. To hold possessions in common, we planned to own one lawnmower and share it. We would get to know our neighbors and share in their life hoping to live out the gospel. If someone had need, we would seek to minister to them.

Then reality set in. It was time to decide to sell houses, or look for church positions. With two of us expecting children, who would work to support the family or would both parents work? Then Ashley's husband had to be hospitalized. His depression had become debilitating. We realized none of us could afford to move into the city. Graduation was coming. Brent's wife, a real estate lawyer, got a great job offer in a Dallas firm near their family. We could not join in God's mission in downtown Atlanta as we had hoped. And our dream of the ideal church started to unravel. We were going to dwell in perfect unity with each other and our neighbors. How pleasant it was going to be.

Perhaps you too have been on the quest for the ideal church whether it was to try to recreate the Spirit born early church of Acts or to go back to a time and place when the church seemed more true or perfect. Or if you are like me I get caught up in our lack...lack of parking, lack of time, lack of commitment, lack of space in the choir loft. If only we could fix this or that, we would have the perfect church.

I admit that I still haven't found that ideal church on fire with study, fellowship, and living out God's mission in community although I think Fort Hill church is a strong church full of wonderful Christians. I would not want to be anywhere else. I haven't found the "perfect" church, but the Lord has found me. God has been working on my heart for years I have been learning to hear his voice. Jesus has taught me to stop looking for the perfect church and look to Him who is perfect in the biblical sense...perfect is whole in right relationship with God and one another through Christ Jesus at work in the Holy Spirit. Look at me, Laura, Jesus says. I am the way, the truth, the life. I have come that all might have life abundant. Come unto me. And that is the call to the Lord's church.

While looking for the ideal church, I realized too that unity is not uniformity, we would never all agree on everything. I learned this from my family experience. I grew up in a family of 5 children and sometimes I

wonder if we really all grew up in the same family!!! Each of my four brothers and I are so different. Just to be sure, I checked, we indeed had the same two parents, Joyce and Carroll Smith, although my brothers used to tease me and tell me that the milk man was my father. Yes, this is the persecution I grew up with as the youngest girl in a family of all brethren!

Unity is a gift that we share through the power of forgiveness poured out in Jesus Christ, which redeems us and puts us on the path of wholeness, sanctification and discipleship. Unity is not something we can create. It is a given. And life in community whether family, church, organization, while a blessing, is not always pleasant....just like families sometimes. Unity comes through Christ.

Life in the Spirit leads us unto community, into the church family, with others who trust in Jesus. And life in the spirit or "Spirituality" is not about reaching perfection or some ideal. It is about the stuff of real life and the work of the Holy Spirit which moves and works in real, sinful people. The Spirit leads the First Church of Jerusalem into a life of study, fellowship, prayers, and breaking of the bread- real life. It leads the First Church into community of sharing possessions and providing for all as they have need. The Holy Spirit leads them into a joyful life of praise and thanksgiving as God works in their life together. This is one way to conceive of the spiritual life. My guess is that the First church of Jerusalem would be in deep and abiding prayer for the people of Alabama who haven't seen this much destruction since Reconstruction and would be holding up those around the swelling mighty Mississippi river today.

Let's consider how spirituality or life in the Spirit is used and what it means for us.

Paul uses the word *pneumatikos* which means the actions and attitudes derived from the work of the Holy Spirit in all. This is spirituality in a Biblical sense. But the church over time made the spiritual life the work of a few "chosen" people. As humans do, we made categories...prayer is spiritual, working with your hands is not. Singing psalms is spiritual, caring for a baby, changing diapers, and wiping up spit-up is not. As humans do, we set up either/or dichotomy. This is spiritual and this is not. The church established monasteries and convents for spiritual life of those committed to it. Other people were called to the so-called "real" world. In feudal society, the older son inherited the family land and the younger son was given to the church.

But over time, spirituality came to mean the "study and practice of the perfect life before God, and extraordinary holiness in the Christian life."¹ This perfect holiness took form in history of the church. For Puritans this perfection became "godliness." For Lutherans it took the form of "Pietism," For Methodists it became "perfectionism." For Presbyterians it became the "right preaching and administration of the sacraments." Consequently, even ol' John Calvin and his magistrates had people burned at the stake or beheaded for not having right doctrine. Spirituality can become the work of humans and not the work of the Spirit. If it is dependent on our goodness and ability to achieve the right belief or practice, then we do not need God.

We gave the task of faith to a few and forgot that the Spirit of God descended upon a community at Pentecost and was distributed to all the gathered who trusted in Jesus. The Spirit formed a mission movement and community which we read about in the book of Acts. And the church bases its salvation on Jesus.

Jesus says in today's Scripture, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." (Jn. 10:9) Or as we sang from First Isaiah, "Surely it is God who saves us; I will trust in him and not be afraid for the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and he will be my Savior." God reminds us that we are human, and God is God.

In this season of Easter...we remember that Jesus through his life, death and resurrection calls people to follow him and trust him as the Good Shepherd. To dwell with Jesus is to have a relationship with God almighty and to know his voice. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to those whom God calls and who turn to him in faith. And on Pentecost, the Spirit of God descended not just on the 12 apostles and disciples. The Spirit of God did not just come to the Jews. The Spirit of God came to dwell in and among a community of different ethnicities, languages, and backgrounds. The church of Jesus Christ was born that day. And the spiritual life is not just for a few but for all in whom the Spirit of God dwells.

Our response is to live out the good news in this place and this time as the Spirit formed church of Jesus Christ. I picked up Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, *Life Together* again this week. He reminds us that "Christian Brotherhood is not a ideal reality, but a divine reality." ²

This week an amendment to the Book of Church Order was passed by a majority of presbyteries through the country. The newspapers have reported this change and made it out to be only about ordination of homosexuals. But, I will tell you that I think it more faithfully expresses how we understand ordination and call. The most important standard for called officers and ministers is to "submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all of our lives." It also is true to historical Presbyterian polity which holds Sessions responsible for examining and ordaining their officers and Presbyteries for examining and calling Ministers of Word and Sacrament always with the consent of the members of the particular church. But without knowledge of how we understand that the Spirit works through the community of faith and yes, even councils and bodies of governance, Amendment 10-A has been painted as a single issue agenda. After the officers meet today, the pastors will offer a gathering so you can learn more next Tuesday evening, May 24. Some in our church rejoice in this change to our Constitution others are deeply upset. I ask you to pray for the church and one another who are in our fellowship across the country. This is why I re-read Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together* alongside this Scripture this week.

Bonhoeffer reminded me that while I have an ideal of community, a "wish dream" he calls it, which is a hindrance to genuine Christian community. That dream is more of what I desire than what God creates on the sure foundation of Jesus Christ. LISTEN>>>

"Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate." Fellowship is a gift. "The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and

strength and promise of all our fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship and pray and hope for it.”³

A spiritual person or community, is one who allows the Holy Spirit work among them. We who have worked in youth ministry have a rule of thumb for youth slow dances----Make room for the Holy Spirit—to encourage appropriate space between couples on the slow dance. The Scripture today reminds us all to make room for the Holy Spirit. To love one another through Jesus Christ is to make room for the Holy Spirit. It is humanly impossible to love enemies, must be the Spirit of Christ dwelling in us that can make that possible. It is humanly impossible to give up possessions and give generously, but the Spirit can do that. It is humanly impossible to create an ideal church because we are sinners in need of God’s mercy each day. It is the work of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit to guide direct and lead us, to be His communion of the Saints, the church in this place and in this time.

I think that is good news. Jesus through the Holy Spirit can work and witness even through broken and forgiven sinners like you and me. Friends, we will never find a perfect church, but we can trust the one who is perfect and have abundant life. May we be a part of that transforming mission in this place and in this time for the sake of the Gospel, I pray.

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Charge and Sending

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.
(Ephesians 3:16-21)

¹Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places; a Conversation in Spiritual Theology*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids) 2005, pp. 28.

²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together; an Exploration of Faith in Community*, p. 28.

³IBID, p. 30.