

THE ZEST OF THE SPIRIT

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Acts 2:1-4 & Romans 8:9-11

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Sometimes when I stand up to preach, I pause and take a deep breath. This morning, might all of you take a deep breath. Now exhale the air. Now quickly exhale again. Notice that we can't keep exhaling without bringing some air into the lungs. So it is with God's Spirit.

When we breathe in God's Holy Spirit and use it to "strengthen," which is what the theologian John Macquarrie says it does: "When we use it without receiving a fresh filling of His Spirit, then we become depleted."

The word spirit and particularly its derivative, spirituality, has become a kind of buzz word among helping professionals. Psychologists and therapists have begun to recognize that not only does the psyche need healing but the spirit as well. In 1984, the well-known psychiatrist, M. Scott Peck, led a conference here at First Congregational Church in which he talked about *"Four Stages of Spiritual Growth."* (P.187) Book stores, both religious and secular, have hundreds of books with titles proclaiming themes on spirituality.

I. SPIRITUAL VACUUM

My intuition tells me that there is a reason for this kind of interest in spiritual matters. Perhaps the spiritual interests point to a spiritual disease. Elizabeth O'Conner plainly stated the problem a few years ago: "Our..... people are bone dry and they are hurting." (P.10) Jesus was aware of how spiritually "bone dry" we can become when he advised: "If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink." The bottom line is that as a nation and a people we are spiritually needy.

A. Additional evidence. There are other evidences that as individuals we are spiritually bone dry.

Some time ago I preached a sermon dealing with the reality of God speaking to us through our dreams. An important aspect of dream interpretation is discovering the meaning of the symbols in a dream. One symbol that occurs in dreams is that of wind or breath. Have you ever dreamed that you were gasping for breath or that you were drowning and you couldn't catch your breath?

Dream interpreters conclude that this is a clear indication that there are spiritual problems in one's life. That you need to inhale a breath of God's Spirit. In fact, the root word for spirit in Greek is breath or wind. The air that we breathe is the bearer of life. But the Spirit of God gives zest and energy for living.

Thus there is a spiritual problem in a person for whom the zest has gone out of life. A writer stares down at a blank page for hours on end and no words come. An artist can no longer paint or find a scene that inspires her or him to pick up a paint brush. A judge sees hopeless case after hopeless case and concludes that all people are hopeless. There is a spiritual problem when a doctor loses interest in medicine and his patients; or a teacher who can see no reason to teach. When a church can no longer identify a "Kingdom dream" or a vision for the future, they are spiritually bone dry.

B. Spiritual depletion affects us physically. When we feel spiritually drained, we can hardly put one foot in front of the next one. About three weeks ago, one of the church softball teams, the White Team of which I am a part, played a game against another church team. The weather was nice and so it was a good time to play softball. One of the things I like about our teams is that regardless of whether or not we win or lose, we enjoy the game. But almost from the beginning this game was different. The team enthusiasm wasn't there.

Our spirits fizzled as the other team made hit after hit. After a while, our only hope was that the other team would become exhausted from running around the bases. Maybe we could make more than two runs. But that was not to be and we got slaughtered. Even visiting the local "watering hole" across the railroad tracks didn't seem to lift the teams' spirit. The attempt to recharge the spirit artificially didn't help much.

C. The reason we become spiritually out of breath is from neglect of the spiritual. If I remember, there weren't as many at the game that night. Neglecting the spirit depletes. Anyone who has ever planted a garden knows that the flowers can die from neglect. When we forget to till the soil and apply fertilizer, the plants die out. A friendship or a marriage will gradually wither when not nourished. A person who at one time had a vital faith and was deeply committed to the church doesn't become cynical overnight.

It is a slow gradual process of neglect. I'll sleep late this Sunday morning and be sure to attend worship next Sunday. Next Sunday comes and you forget that you promised to take the kids to Six Flags. Soon we become self-inflated and feel like we don't really need worship. What's all this religious stuff about anyway? As William James proclaimed; a "barrenness and a dryness" sets up like concrete. (P.201) When the personal disciplines of worship, contemplation and prayer are neglected, the spirit begins to waste away.

One might argue that a lack of zest for life is because we have chained ourselves to the treadmill of overwork. There is truth to this, but that's not the real problem. Most of us find time to rest in front of the television. Resting the body and nurturing the spirit of God within are two totally different things. Watching the Braves--oops, I mean the Brewers play ball and praying are different in purpose and outcome.

II. NURTURING THE SPIRIT

Well, if neglect is a cause of spiritual barrenness, then we might take a personal inventory of what is being neglected. For those of us who are regular at worship but still feel a lack of zest in living, we may need to resurrect a daily time of prayer. Or maybe you discover that what you most need is a time of quiet contemplation and reflection.

A. Contemplation. Those of you who were in worship a couple of Sundays ago and heard the "train sermon" might remember how I was feeling the need to get away to Holy Hill for a quiet time. In the sermon I confessed that instead of nurturing the soul, my son and I washed and waxed the car. Well, I finally tended to my own spiritual barrenness. I made the trek to that place of contemplation.

After walking the Pilgrimage Trail, I found a comfortable place to sit on a tree log. I began to read and reflect. Within moments my ears were filled with the sounds of the woods. Squirrels were playing. A deer rustled the leaves within a

few yards of me. One sound seemed to be the loudest, a buzzing sound; and it wasn't the spirit of God, unless God sends His spirit in the form of mosquitoes. I managed to survive the mosquito attack for several hours and I came away feeling stronger and more alive.

During that contemplation, I began to read Thomas Merton's book, "*The Waters of Siloe*." This is the short history of the Cistercian monastic order of the Trappists. One fact that Merton recognized was that following periods of wars or crisis, there would be increases in the number of persons to enter a monastery. After World War I, a cowboy who had herded cattle in the west became a monk at Gethsemane. Contemplation became their way of healing.

B. Second, we can breathe in the spirit of God by being in fellowship with others. In the Acts passage we read, "They were all together in one place," when the Spirit of God filled them. The spiritual law at the core of our being requires that we reach out. The very survival of the soul, of spirit, of psychic life and personality is dependent on inhaling (receiving) and exhaling (giving) in relationships. Elizabeth O'Conner again wrote: "I am being killed when there is no one to receive my thoughts, my feelings, my innermost self." (P.14)

A moment ago, I shared with you the story of the White Teams' depleted spirit and humiliating loss. Since that embarrassing loss, the team came together for a golf game, food and fellowship. This past Tuesday evening we had another softball game. This time we were stronger in number. Even before the game started, one could feel there was a fresh spirit in the air. There was new zest despite the hot muggy air. We won the game with a score of 7 to 6. I can't remember but there may have been some speaking in tongues in this game.

As a people living in the spirit, when we are together, those who feel inspired inspire others. Those who love unconditionally inspire others to love. Those who are filled with the spirit of God encourage others to seek a fresh filling. No wonder the scripture encourages us to come together in one accord.

If you are spiritually depleted, check over the list and determine the cause. Is there a need for worship, prayer, contemplation, or do you need to share with a friend?

CONCLUSION

According to statistics, one of the fastest growing age groups in the U.S. is centenarians; those people who are one-hundred years and older. A study reported in *Parade Magazine* told of some basic character traits that could contribute to their long lives. I want to share three of them with you. First, there is a genuine love of life. They enjoy the simple pleasures of a walk in the woods or cultivating a flower garden. Second, they have led "people-oriented" lives, helping those less fortunate than themselves. For instance, one 100 year old visits a nursing home for she says that "God intended us to reach out to others." Last, most all "enjoy active spiritual lives". These people who have inhaled and exhaled the breath of life more than anyone here, also inhale the Breath of God.

Today, we live a physical life of breathing in and out. But to truly live is to live in the Spirit of God. Amen.