

# ONE SPIRIT FOR ALL

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John 7:37-39 - Rivers of living water  
Numbers 11:24-30 - Moses and the Spirit

I'm finding myself more and more every week just wanting to sit in silence after the anthem, and I think that's so appropriate because of the kind of leadership the choir gives us. Today's anthem ["Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove"], especially, leads us into a sense of sacred presence and to a place where the music opens our hearts. We can just sit for a moment of silence and let the Spirit enter into that openness. Then I stand here as the one who must break the silence by starting to talk, and I struggle to find a way to speak in a way that doesn't shatter that openness. Inevitably it does shatter that openness because we shift from engaging our hearts to engaging our heads. Perhaps the supreme challenge for the preacher is to discover a way to speak directly to the heart, especially on Pentecost. I find every year that it is harder and harder to think of rational things to say about the Holy Spirit because that Spirit is really a moment, a part of our faith when it's time just to be still, to open the heart, to listen, and to let the Spirit touch us.

We have in John's gospel this story of Jesus talking about the Spirit as living water, the living water being poured out and everyone drinking it, and then everyone's heart becoming a wellspring from which the living water flows to one another. That particular passage in John was set at the end of a festival when for seven days the people went down to the pool of Siloam, gathered up a golden pitcher of water, and ritually carried it up into the temple. (This event was an echo of the story during the Exodus when the people had no water, Moses touched the rock, the water--the living water--came gushing forth, and the people carried the water up into the temple.) In John's gospel Jesus is watching the activity and telling the people that, instead of just carrying the water into the temple, everyone is going to drink the water--the living water of the Spirit. And that is a kind of breaking open of the ritual and the tradition of keeping the water in the temple. To pour it out and let everyone drink was a powerful, powerful, image, statement, challenge, that Jesus gave.

To understand that challenge even more clearly, I want to go back earlier in the story because the biblical witness is a story that just flows on century after century. We understand Jesus' words and Jesus' ministry fully only by understanding the story that has led up to it. So we flash back to the story in the book of Numbers when the people were in the wilderness and the Spirit came upon Moses. This story is at the heart of Old Testament understanding of prophecy. Moses is a prophet who has this powerful role of speaking the word of God, a role which results from the Spirit coming upon him. So here is Moses, the Spirit-inspired prophetic leader. And then we have this odd little story about Moses giving some of that Spirit to some of the elders in the group. These elders, who now have this powerful Spirit, start prophesying--speaking the words of the sacred--

within this group, within the camp of this band of runaway slaves out in the wilderness. And some others start complaining that these people are prophesying when they have no right to prophesy.

Did you notice that little bit in today's reading from John where, following the story, there is a little explanation--a sort of footnote--stating that although Jesus spoke about the Spirit there was as yet no Spirit. Did you hear that? There was no Spirit yet? But in fact there was a Spirit, a long time ago. So why would the gospel commentary say there was no Spirit yet? Why? Well, because somehow we have this habit of always wanting to squash it. That's what happened in Moses' time to those people in the camp when they were in the wilderness. The Spirit that Moses was carrying, through which he was leading the people, was now beginning to be spread to others. But the people were complaining, saying that these others had no right to prophesy.

And so there is introduced, way back in that early story, one of the fundamental hassles we get into in our spiritual lives. That hassle is this tension between a Spirit, a sacred power that wants just to break out, and our nasty little habit of wanting to restrict it and attach it and turn it into an authoritarian sort of thing with institutions and officials. And we want to limit the power of the Spirit and sacred authority to the designated officials that are properly selected, stamped, approved and trained. Isn't that one of the most fundamental tensions in our spiritual lives? So John's gospel can say there was no Spirit yet. Well, there was a Spirit, but it had been squashed long ago. With time, we would want to make that a much more subtle story because it comes out again and again and again, and the prophets down through the years tell the whole Hebrew Bible story of the way the Spirit tries to break out. And then it gets "smunched" again.

However, there evolved in the late Old Testament period this growing sense that the moment--God's moment, the day of the Lord, the Messianic Age--that God's moment would be the moment when the Spirit would finally break out from all its shackles and be poured out on everyone. Everyone--even the kids, even the old folks, even the women and the men--would prophesy because the Spirit would no longer be restricted to a few organized, designated, officials. The Spirit would just be poured out on everyone. And ultimately we would no longer have to be told what to do. You see, the Spirit still plays around with the dilemma of authority. Even today it stands in tension with that dilemma. Our lives even today are caught up with all of the authoritarian bodies and groups--whether institutions of education, law, medical care, government--and when we look around, all these authority bodies seem to be in a mess.

We get really discouraged if we believe that's what our lives depend upon. But the liberating, saving, experience, is to feel the Spirit coming into our hearts, and to realize that our lives don't depend on all those things in what Jesus calls the "world." We become set free from all that. It doesn't mean that we no longer live in the world; it doesn't even mean that we no longer caringly and lovingly tend those institutions. It means that the Spirit sets us free, so that to know what to do is not ultimately to follow the rules or to follow some authoritarian thing, even within the church. Rather, it means that to know what to do in our lives is to listen to the Spirit, to open our hearts.

Ironically, that sounds somewhat like a kind of individualism. But it isn't; it's precisely the opposite because when we open our hearts to the Spirit that is poured out on

everyone, the Spirit becomes a point of unity--a subtle, spiritual, sublime, unity--because each one of us is connected to that same Spirit.

What we transcend is all those organizations and races, beliefs and creeds, even national identities--all those things that divide us into little groups and pit us against each other. The Spirit cuts through all of that and gives us at once a profound individuality of the Spirit. Each one of us is thereby enabled to listen to the Spirit in our own heart, and to find the power and direction and inspiration and wisdom and energy for living in faithfulness to the divine. At the same time we realize our oneness across all boundaries, even religious boundaries.

Jesus didn't intend to begin a new religion. He began by starting a movement that transcended religion. Judaism was the context within which that movement began, and yet all those early stories in John's gospel and in Acts are about the movement breaking out from Judaism. We're no longer talking about one God among all the other Gods. We're talking about the sacred that is beyond all the Gods. Jesus wasn't merely introducing another God. Even Judaism had that sense of "let's stop using God's name 'Yahweh,' because that makes it sound like it's just one more God along with all the rest. Let's just talk about the sacred which is beyond all the Gods." The sacred is the Spirit that unites us all. In that Spirit we find our freedom; in that Spirit our hearts open to the sacred and to one another, and we realize our unity in a deeper and more profound way than ever before.

As we take a child in our arms [today was baptism Sunday], touch the water to his forehead, and say those wonderful words of baptism and pray for the Holy Spirit, we open ourselves as a community to the Spirit that is planted in our hearts and in our lives--even in the earliest days of our lives. And in baptism we are praying that that Spirit will grow in the child's heart, praying with gratitude for the way that Spirit has grown within all our hearts, celebrating our baptism in which the living water is poured out beyond all boundaries on everyone.

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