

# AUTHORITY OF THE SPIRIT

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Acts 10: 44-48 - Baptism according to the Holy Spirit

1 John 5: 1-6 - The Spirit testifies

John 15: 9-17 - Abide in my love

“Abide in God’s love.” These are beautiful words from John’s gospel--words that express one of the most central themes throughout John’s writings in both the gospel and the letters. That theme is love. As I read those words I thought of them as wonderful words of blessing. As Garry [Gibson] mentioned, I’m leaving this congregation in the summer, and so I’m preparing to do my farewell. In the Spirit of Christian faith and community, to me the way to say farewell is with blessing. And so as I considered these words I thought this is part of the blessing that I would want to leave with Camrose United Church--the blessing that you would always know God’s love, and in that love embrace one another in the fellowship of love, thereby abiding always in God’s love. So there, we’ll have our hymn now!! However, I thought that might be just a little bit short for a sermon, even though it is probably the most important thing I have to say!

You know me; I always want to try to look at the other side, and when you take a look at the other side of “abide in God’s love” in the way a fellowship, a church community, comes together in God’s love, the other side is that “abiding” is not always easy. Sometimes it’s a little bit hard to hold the Christian community together in the bond of God’s love. Sometimes it’s not a real easy thing just to “abide in God’s love” perpetually and peacefully.

So I thought I would take a closer look at this and reflect upon the challenges that exist in this abiding in God’s love, and upon the resources that exist for enabling that to happen. I’m talking specifically about the Christian church, the fellowship of the church, but of course this applies beyond--into family life, the life of society, and indeed perhaps to the life of the world as a whole. But I’m talking today about the Christian church, the faith community. Community, togetherness, is so central for us. Notice in his gospel that John doesn’t just say “if you love each other that’s great,” or “let the feelings flow.” He actually directs this loving-one-another as a commandment. There is a source of authority at work here. We’re being told something about how to live our lives. So in that sense we could even say it verges on Christian ethics--that loving one another is the right thing to do.

I don’t think we need to go into a heavy authoritarian thing about this. The church has come in recent decades through a reaction against authoritarianism which makes the gospel dry up, but it would be a mistake to throw out the baby with the bath water and reject authority altogether. Jesus is speaking with authority here. He’s speaking in the language of commandment when he commands us to love one another. So this loving one another isn’t just a nice flow of feeling; it’s actually the right thing to do and it’s the faithful way to live. The challenge is that there are times in a Christian community when

it is hard to hold that faith community together. There are times when challenges tend to divide us.

Stop and think about it. What does it mean for a congregation or fellowship of several hundred people--not constant, but people coming and going, adding to and taking from all the time--to be making choices about its direction as it moves into its future, and to be making those choices together? If you stop and think about it, that's a little bit of a challenge, isn't it? Now of course that's where authority comes in. We place authority in the hands of leaders that help us stay together and move together as a Christian fellowship. But in the church there is more than just the authority of leaders; there is the authority of Christ who commands us to love one another. And so there is the work of loving one another, of staying connected, committed, and devoted to one another, above all else.

Let me just take one example. You know I'm not the one who takes innocuous examples; I always try to pick the most challenging one. Perhaps in the near future life of this congregation, as in many other congregations within the United Church, the most challenging issue requiring decision will be same-sex marriage. Loving one another doesn't sound so innocuous now, does it? I know that many people within our churches, including this one, have some wariness about that question because it certainly threatens to divide us. There are people with strong feelings on both sides of the issue, and there are people in the middle who have really not clearly decided one way or the other. There are people who feel so strongly about their own positions that they are disgusted with the idea that the church would even raise the question. So we're all across the spectrum.

Given that issue and the views on it, how do we live out this commandment to love another--to abide together in God's love? How does a congregation make a choice which this congregation is planning to do next fall? How does a congregation make that choice as well as all the other choices that must be made? Maybe some decisions will be even more significant than that, with the year of transition that Garry [Gibson] spoke about. The Ministerial Support and Personnel Committee that Garry chairs is already listening deeply to the Spirit for its direction as we move into this transition year. So it's important at first just to recognize that there are challenges. Some congregations have tended to develop habits of avoiding conflict, and that makes it even harder for them.

What I'm trying to get at is that facing a question like that, as well as facing many other challenges in the life of a church, in a way that enables us all to stay together, to continue to abide together in God's love, can leave us feeling a little bit at a loss. How are we going to do that? How is that going to work? Well, in some of the reading I have done on conflict management, not just in the church but anywhere, one of the most important principles that has come out for me has to do with commitment.

Here is a simplistic example. Imagine two groups of people who are in conflict and you are trying to manage that conflict. Each group has a position and the positions are different. Each group comes into that situation with a commitment to its own position, right? Each has a position, and each has a commitment to that position. Now, as a conflict manager trying to manage that conflict, what are you trying to do? Are you trying to get them to change their positions, or are you trying to get them to change their commitments? Think about it. The point is that you don't have to get people to change

their positions; that may very well be impossible. What you have to do is get people to change their commitments so that they become committed to the solution.

The solution lies beyond both positions. There's a solution that is in the best interest of their friendship, of the church, or of whatever body within which the conflict occurs. The job of the conflict manager is to enable those people to change their commitments from being committed to their positions to being committed to the solution. It then becomes possible to move beyond the deadlock into something that doesn't involve resolution by choosing one position or another. Rather, it takes both groups beyond their positions into a solution that is in the best interest of the church or whatever the organization is.

There is no simple commandment that we can look to in the Bible that tells us how to resolve this issue or indeed most of the issues that face the church. We can't just look up that question and say, "Oh, there's the answer. We're done." Some of us wish answers were that simple, but they aren't. Nevertheless, there is in our faith tradition, in the stories told in the scriptures, an authority that is beyond either my position or someone else's position. Like that commitment to the solution there is an authority beyond us, and that authority is the Holy Spirit.

Listen to these stories from Acts and John. In the Book of Acts here is this young faith community which began within Judaism. There are Jews who have realized that Christ is the fulfillment of the promise and they are spreading the word and baptizing Jews who recognize that Christ is the son of God. And one day they find themselves gathered with people who include some Gentiles, which just means "non-Jews." The group includes some Gentiles, and they see the Spirit. They see the Spirit falling upon not only the Jews in the crowd but also upon the Gentiles. This is a surprise, because everybody up until then thought this gospel was only for the Jews and not for the Gentiles.

And so this is a story that marks the beginning of the expansion of the gospel beyond Jews to include Gentiles. How did those people in that early church know that that was the right thing to do? It would have been an awful long argument in the meeting of the Church Council, with or without a quorum [an oblique reference to the current difficulty of achieving a quorum at our congregation's Council meetings], to decide whether all of a sudden, today, Gentiles should be allowed to be baptized. Can you imagine being on that Council trying to make that decision? The solution comes by simply pointing out the fact that the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentiles as well as the Jews. And so the Holy Spirit, not some ecclesiastical argument, is the authority. The solution comes from looking to the Spirit whose authority was recognized in that situation.

Similarly, that reading from John's first letter talks about believing that Jesus is the son of God. It goes on and on about the beliefs and the empowerment of those beliefs, but it doesn't raise the question of how a person gets to believe that--how that belief emerges. And in those days whenever there were arguments about authority, people would testify and others would hear the testimonies. And so there is this little sentence right at the end which says it's the Spirit that testifies; it's the Spirit within us that testifies. And so that takes us right past all the ecclesiastical arguments about doctrines, about what is the right thing to believe or what is the wrong thing to believe. It says the

ultimate authority is the Spirit within us that testifies to the truth. So we must learn to look to the Spirit in order to find that source of authority that can take us through even the most difficult challenges to our love for one another, to our unity.

I've had experiences within the church when we have had difficult decisions to make. People have had their positions, and they have talked back and forth and back and forth, starting off by being committed to their positions. But then some people have started to talk about something that is more important than anybody's position--namely, about the church itself. They have started to talk about where the Spirit is leading the church, talking about discerning the will of the Spirit rather than the will of the people. Notice, friends, what that says about democracy. Our church uses democratic processes but it is not ultimately a democratic institution. Democracy means rule by the will of the people; everybody votes for what he or she wants, and whoever wins the vote settles the issue. The church's way of operating has a much higher mode of authority. The church is what is called a theocracy, not a democracy, and its commitment is to be guided by the will of God and not the will of the people. Our task, therefore, is not to compete to get our way when we get into conflict. Rather, it is to work together to discern God's will, to discern the leading of the Spirit which--not the will of the people--is our highest authority.

That task requires a deep and profound trust--even more than that--for which there is no formula. There is no nice, neat, formula that says when we look at this and add that, then think about this, put those together, we get our answer. It actually requires a deep trust to enter into the conversation with a commitment beyond our own positions, and to hear one another. That's what loving one another really is; it is to hear one another, truly to hear and respect one another, and to let that release us from our positions and take us to a place that's a little bit of a wilderness whence we know not where it goes. And then the Spirit moves.

I have been in church courts where that has happened. We come into that empty place of wilderness and then there is a feeling that something has come together. We can't explain it any way other than to say it is the Spirit moving through us. At that point some kind of a beautiful, elegant, solution emerges and there is a reunification; there is a sense of togetherness and a resolution of the question. Then we sing, we worship together, and there is that feeling of being together again, of having been brought back together by the Spirit in a way that we couldn't have achieved by ourselves, by our own wisdom, by our own power. And that's the authority of the Spirit.

And so, as I think about moving on, having been so much a part of the life of this congregation, and now disengaging and thinking about you folks moving on to the challenges that you will have in the months and years to come, my prayer is simply this: that you will continue to abide in God's love, directed, strengthened, encouraged, and empowered by God's Holy Spirit. And I invite you all, over the weeks and months to come, to join me in that prayer.

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