

## “The Spirit that Dwells in You”

### 9 Pentecost A

“But those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.” Romans 8:5b

Living a Spirit directed life is the most challenging life we can have! Holy Scripture and the Prayer Book teach us to tune into the Holy Spirit. The promptings of such a Spirit directed life are practical: stopping to give directions to someone who is lost, refusing to keep the change a cashier overpays, or going out of our way to help a friend in need. These are opportunities for us to listen and obey the Spirit.

I dream about a time when the body’s mental and physical desires will not drive human behavior. It’s been almost two thousand years since the apostle wrote about this duality between flesh and the Spirit. Like the young child that says, “Daddy are we there yet?” we find that the struggle is yet before us. Is it possible to develop a race of human beings driven by a higher, spiritual nature? I have seen and admire people that rise to such a life. I think of those committed to a monastic life such as the Episcopal Order, Julian of Norwich, located in our own diocese. They overcome human nature to live by the Spirit. Perhaps this is more difficult for the Christian living an ordinary life in society. These depend on the Spirit to teach, to guide, and convict them – a steward so to speak.

If you ever get to Venice, one of the places to see is Saint Mark’s Square, the spot Napoleon called “the drawing room of Europe.” But if you go there, make sure your belly is covered up. It’s not that there’s exactly a dress code, but there is an expectation of decorum.

Venice had 20 million visitors last year, so at any given time, there can be thousands of people in this famous square, which is surrounded by great architecture and sites of historic importance. But some people just don’t get it, and they aren’t above wandering onto the square bare-chested or with their midriff exposed. Some carelessly drop litter and others try to set out picnic lunches on the square. Still others treat the nearby Grand Canal as if it were a beach.

The city leaders have no interest in keeping tourists away, but they do want the niceties to be observed. So recently, in addition to posting signs naming the prohibitions, they have started employing a squad of women as stewards of the square to make sure tourists are not taking unwarranted liberties.

These stewards, several of whom can speak more than one language so as to deal with foreign tourists, patrol the square and are ready to intervene at the first sign of unacceptable behavior. They wear special T-shirts to identify their role, and they try to do their work in a friendly way. For example, if a family starts to lay out a picnic, a steward will direct them to a location where such

activity is permitted. And most visitors who are corrected by a steward respond positively. However, when tourists turn belligerent, the women are able to call in police backup who can hand out fines ranging from 25 to 500 euros (\$40 - \$800).

Actually, the stewards aren't there to stop people from enjoying themselves, but to remind them of the importance of conducting themselves in a way that recognizes the specialness of the place.

And most local people agree with the idea of stewards in the square. They appreciate that some standards are being imposed.

Actually Venice is not alone in its efforts to hold the line. You can't go into St. Peter's in Rome in shorts or sleeveless blouses, and several other significant tourist spots have certain standards.

What's more, most of us can think of some places where some standards and stewards might be useful. We've been at weddings or funerals, for example, where someone has shown up dressed inappropriately, which strikes us as disrespectful of the family.

Our reason for discussing all this is not to bemoan the state of our dress or manners, but to illustrate the idea that there are times and places where we need a steward to direct us in how to be in the square of life. That can be hard to hear in our individualist, don't-fence-me-in society, but it's true nonetheless.

The Spirit-led life is one where the indwelling God-given steward, is present to instruct, to guide, to keep our human nature in check and if necessary arrest our behavior when it violates the divine or human law. Some harsh judgment was handed down on a couple named Ananias and Sapphira where they were found to have lied to the Holy Spirit when they withheld their pledge to the church (see the book of Acts 5:3).

Are there people who, by the grace of God respond to the still, small voice of the Spirit? Paul seems to think so – for he is writing not only about personal experience but he is writing to the Roman church. He writes in the ninth verse, “But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you” (Romans 8:9).

Let's not be hard on ourselves if this passage is hard to grasp. St. Paul is building upon his earlier writings on sin, death, God's law and life in Christ. In this portion of his letter he is simplifying our understanding of life to two possible ways of being in the world. One is guided by our flesh or human nature and the other is guided by the Spirit of God or the godly nature.

I don't think St. Paul directly condemns us for being human. He writes of Christ condemning the acts of sin within our humanity. He clearly writes “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). To be in Jesus Christ for St. Paul meant living by the godly nature that sets us free from being dominated by a sinful human nature. For Paul, the Spirit

dwelling in the believer is the evidence that Jesus Christ is alive. To be otherwise caught up and remain in human nature is spiritual death. And spiritual death can lead to all sort of complications in this life.

Jesus is the model for living. As God lived in Jesus humanity St. Paul also wants for his readers.

What are the signs of living a Spirit driven life?

There are three signs of the Spirit-driven life according to St. Paul. Christians are expected to desire them. They are 1) focus one's mind on the things of the Spirit 2) seek what promotes the Christ-life and peace 3) please God by submitting to God's law of living. Because the Spirit fulfills the Law of Moses in our lives Christians seek to love God and their neighbors.

God opened the way for all to live a life pleasing to Him. He sends His word into all kinds of soil that all who hear will receive it, and may produce fruit. The Spirit gives us opportunity to respond to God's word and to grow in to extraordinary people of faith.

A wealthy tourist was admiring a necklace worn by a local Indian.

"What is it made of?" she asked.

"Alligator's teeth," the Indian replied.

"I suppose," she said patronizing, "that they mean as much to you as pearls do to me."

"Oh no," he objected. "Anybody can open an oyster."

Do not settle for the ordinary but strive to be extraordinary Christians by the power of the Spirit. May God give us ears to hear his voice, a longing for His life and peace and strength to obey the law of Christ. Amen