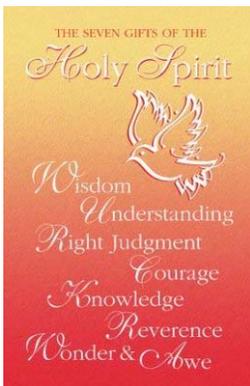


THE ORIGINAL MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

Sermon, May 20, 2018

Text: Isaiah 11:2-3a

A week ago Tuesday my son left for his summer mission in Dubai. That afternoon (*prior to his late evening departure*), Hannah and I joined him and five of his seminary friends at the movies to see **Avengers: Infinity War**, the popular blockbuster film that is packing the theaters right now. I later learned (*according to MTV movie critic Amy Nicholson*) the original Avengers was inspired by a 1960 movie, **The Magnificent Seven**, a Western starring Yul Brynner, Eli Wallach, Steve McQueen, Charles Bronson, Robert Vaughn, Brad Dexter, James Coburn and Horst Buchholz. The first Avengers comic book was published in 1963, three years after **the Magnificent Seven** was a hit ... with Ant Man, the Hulk, Thor, Iron Man and the Wasp; Captain America came along in Issue #4. The Avenger theme of a group of loner and independent tough guy characters possessing unique skills and special powers called together for a common purpose; that was inspired by **The Magnificent Seven**. The original **Magnificent Seven** was a group of seven loner gunfighters recruited and hired by sheriff Yul Brynner to protect a small village in Mexico from a group of marauding bandits. A 2016 remake of the film starred Denzel Washington in Yul Brynner's role (*the marauding bandits were replaced by a mad capitalist miner who was plotting to take over the town*). MTV's Amy Nicholson panned the remake, and in her review mentioned that tidbit about the first Avengers being inspired by the original Magnificent Seven.¹ That original 1960 film wasn't actually the original **Magnificent Seven**, as it was a remake itself; it was an Old West-style remake of a popular 1954 Japanese film called **Seven Samurai**.



But the REAL original “Magnificent Seven” are featured on your bulletin cover this morning and were also mentioned in our Old Testament reading from Isaiah! In the catechism of the Roman Catholic Church, these are known as The Seven Gifts of the Spirit. From Isaiah 11 again, a prophecy speaking about the coming Messiah: *“The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him -- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel (right judgment) and of might (fortitude, or courage), the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord (reverence, piety) — and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. (Wonder and Awe).”* According to Catholic tradition dating back at least to Thomas Aquinas in the mid-thirteenth century (*in his master work Summa Theologia*), the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are character traits that Jesus Christ alone possesses in their fullness but that He freely shares with the members of His body (*i.e., His Church*) as they grow in faith and in His likeness. The seven Latin terms are: (1) *sapientia* (wisdom) (2) *intellectus* (understanding) (3) *consilium* (counsel, right judgment) (4) *fortitudo* (fortitude, courage) (5) *scientia* (knowledge; the old Latin saying, *“scientia potentia est”* is “knowledge is power”) (6) *pietas* (piety, reverence) (7) *timor domini*. (*the fear of the Lord. “Sapientiae Timor Domini Initium” is the proverb “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”*) The Catholic church teaches these traits are infused into every Christian at baptism and are sealed in the sacrament of confirmation; this is not the forum to debate that tenet; I’ll just say we hold a more nuanced view in that we believe the Spirit works of divine volition and is not necessarily motivated, moved by, or limited to the actions of our earthly sacraments and ordinances. In the Roman Catholic liturgy for Confirmation, this is prayed: *“All powerful God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by water and the Holy Spirit you freed your sons and daughters from sin and gave them new life. Send your Holy Spirit upon them to be their helper and guide. Give them the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of right judgment and courage, the spirit of knowledge and reverence. Fill them with the spirit of wonder and awe in your presence. We ask this through Christ our Lord.”*

Someday I may do a seven part series on each of these, but not today. For now, I’ll just point out these gifts are all about the Spirit of God helping us discern and understand and boldly live out what is right and good and wholesome and holy, and about helping us truly delight in living in God’s presence, and about our making good and sound judgments along life’s way by exercising/utilizing these gifts. Just a quick aside: “Making good and sound judgments” It’s not about being *judgmental*, it’s about *making good judgments*, sound decisions, discerning choices. The Latin “intellectus,” from which we get the word “intelligence,” comes from two root words: *inter*, meaning “between,” and *legere*, meaning “to choose.”² The very word “intelligence” implies an ability to make smart choices; a truly intelligent person in the literal sense of the word is one who uses his/her Spirit gifted heart and head to make good choices, discerning decisions, sound judgments ... between good and bad, truth and falsehood, love and hate, gentleness and cruelty, humility and arrogance, between what is constructive and destructive, and ultimately,

¹ See <http://www.mtv.com/news/2935220/magnificent-seven-denzel-washington-chris-pratt-review>

² See <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=intelligence>

between things that lead to life and things that lead to destruction and death. And just a word about "fear and awe"; two words describing one spiritual gift: Note the word "delight" in Isaiah. *"He delights in the fear of the Lord."* This certainly isn't about the "terror" kind of fear, it's about a respect and love and honor, and a sense of awe-filled wonder about God, that just makes you *delight* to honor Him in all you do. I like how one former colleague expressed it in a benediction he cited often: *"May you love God so much, that you love nothing else too much; and may you fear God so much, that you fear nothing else at all."* Except, perhaps, to do anything that would cause Him to grieve.

In a few moments, I will be addressing ANOTHER Magnificent Seven, the seven students sitting in the front pew, the students of our 2017-2018 Confirmation Class! As you can see in the liturgy listed in your bulletin inserts, I will be using the following words: *"Beloved in the Lord, in your Baptism you received the sign and seal of your union with Jesus Christ, and were solemnly engaged to be the Lord's. God in His goodness has brought you to years of responsibility, and you now desire to acknowledge before God and His Church the covenant then made on your behalf, to profess your faith in the Lord Jesus, to consecrate yourselves to Him, and thereby to bind yourselves anew to His service."*

"You were solemnly engaged to be the Lord's." I always like to point out on Confirmation Sundays that the "solemn engagement" of Baptism can be likened to an "arranged betrothal" of the child to Jesus Christ by the child's parents. The parents "betroth" the child to Jesus, and they promise to do all they can to raise the child to know, love, honor and obey Jesus ... and the congregation responds by basically promising to help the parents fulfill that baptismal promise. When the child comes to *"years of responsibility,"* the young adult **confirms** the "engagement" by making vows of commitment, much like a man and a woman do in a wedding ceremony. That's what Confirmation is all about. In Confirmation, the "engaged" young person stands before God and witnesses to publicly, personally and permanently bind him/herself to the Person of Jesus Christ ... thus becoming part of the Church, which the Bible calls the Bride of Christ. Now, in the typical wedding ceremony, the engaged person stands before God and other witnesses to publicly bind him/herself to another person ... promising committed devotion and love *"for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health."* In Confirmation, the "engaged" young person is essentially doing the same thing. In a sense, they are saying "I Do" to Jesus' proposal, pledging faithfulness and fidelity to Him. Today Logan, Nicholas, Adam, Mandy-Lynn, Grace, Vanessa and Evan formally and publically join all those who have said "Yes" to the divine proposal over the millennia. They now stand ready to formally take their place as part of the Family, the Holy Family of God. The grand wonder of our salvation is that we are all "married into" this big eternal Family. We are all part of the Church, the Bride and Body of Christ.

Just as an important related aside: Marriage is commitment to a specific some**BODY**. And I emphasize the word **BODY**. Yes, the commitment is to that person who animates that body, but it also involves loving devotion to and care of and support for that particular body through which the person is manifested or made known ... *"for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health."* As mentioned, the Bible refers to the church as the Bride of Christ; it also refers to the church as the **body** of Christ. **The church** is that imperfect bodily institution through which the spirit of Christ manifests Himself and helps us to grow in *sapientia, intellectus, consilium fortitudo, scientia, pietas and timor Domini*. And as these magnificent seven gifts come to fruition in our lives, we are enabled to know and enjoy life more abundantly, now and forever. *And these gifts are best nurtured, developed and matured through the ministry of the Body!*

Now, "bodies" always look their best on their wedding day! But as anyone who has been married for more than, oh, a year can tell you, it doesn't take long to find the imperfections and faults. Or for imperfections and faults to develop ... I should know, I was married about fifty pounds ago. In like manner, the body of Christ may look good today to the young men and women who are publicly devoting themselves in faith to Her, but like any body, it has its faults. After all, this Body called The Church always has and always will be made up of imperfect people. With God's help we do our best to keep the Body in shape, but there are blemishes, imperfections; things are prone to fall apart, and things change. But I remind these "Magnificent Seven" and all of us that we are committed first and foremost to the Person who animates this Body we call the church, *and we have all promised to be faithful to His Body!* Hang in there! Keep your promises and stay involved with the church! It is the best, and really the **only**, way you'll discover the deep riches and rewards of committed, long-term faithfulness to the Person Who animates the body, the One who gives us all wisdom, understanding, right judgment, fortitude, knowledge, reverence, wonder and awe.

At the risk of being slightly crass, let me say that we don't love Jesus Christ for His body. Our faith is not rooted in the church, alone. Our faith is in Jesus Christ. And when our faith is truly rooted in Christ, we will have a much more tolerant, gracious and loving attitude toward the foibles and imperfections inherent in the Body of Christ, the church. Again, in the wisdom of God it is through the Body that we best encounter the Spirit Who animates the Body ... and Who through the ministry of His Body goes on to develop within each one of us wisdom, understanding, right judgment, courage, knowledge, reverence, awe and wonder ... in this life and on into the next!