

PSALMS, HYMNS AND SPIRITUAL SONGS
Sermon (by Director of Music John Black)
Pentecost Sunday June 5, 2022
Texts: Ephesians 5:15-20, John 14:15-27

“Be filled with the Spirit,” Paul commands, with seemingly little guidance on how to reach such an encounter. The lack of a detailed step-by-step process for achieving Spirit-filled status might imply that we only need to invite to receive – and, to a degree, that is the case. But there is a bit more embedded in this passage.

Notice that Paul’s urging to “be filled with the Spirit” is prefaced with his instruction to “understand the Lord’s will ... walking not as unwise, but as wise.” We see this same structure in our reading from John’s account: “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counselor to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth.” Understanding the Word of the Lord, living according to His commands, and being filled with the Holy Spirit, all inseparably linked: truth and Spirit.

This is not to say that by fulfilling an obligation we become worthy recipients who then receive the Spirit. Remember how John begins his Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The “Word” referenced here is the “Incarnate Word” to whom we sang in our opening hymn: Jesus Christ, who, in his perfect state IS the personification of the Word of God. When we acquaint ourselves with the written Word and live according to its statutes, we are not simply following commands: we are getting to know Him, the Word Incarnate, forming a relationship through which He may fill us more and more with the Holy Spirit. This isn’t just a question of WHAT we have to do, but of WHO we need to know.

Paul goes on to describe what an encounter with the Spirit will look like. As our Spirit-filled living leads us to “make music from our hearts to the Lord” singing “psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs,” we are also “addressing one another,” professing our faith together in public worship, invoking the presence of the Holy Spirit among the gathered body of believers, assembling here each week to worship God and encourage one another in our faith journeys. And what more unifying, profoundly Spirit-filled medium is there for corporate worship than the gift of congregational singing: our ministry of music.

Contemporary hymn writer Keith Getty notes that “the sight and sound of a congregation singing praise to God together is a radical witness in a culture that rejects God and embraces individualism. Singing together bears compelling witness to the truth. It says to those watching on and listening in that, just as we sing the same melody together, we share the same faith, THE faith; commitment to our one Lord of all, who transforms the life we live together and will bring us home to eternity.”

In this passage, those singing are the ENTIRE gathered assembly – this is more than the choir singing before the congregation. Those “watching on and listening in” are outside the walls of the community of faith, hearing strains of the church’s song. The song itself isn’t just the melody we sing together on Sunday morning: it becomes the drumbeat of every moment of our lives. What we sing in worship continues in our hearts throughout life’s journey, penetrating through the drone of our dying culture and witnessing the radical truth, power, and love of the Holy Spirit at work in each one of us.

Music has the power to inspire us this way – to be a tool through which the Spirit may touch our souls and guide our lives. Jean Calvin wrote that music “has a sacred and almost incredible power to move hearts in one way or another,” describing the gift of music as an “instrument of praise to God.” TRUTH and UNDERSTANDING are key to Calvin’s philosophy on music in worship: for him, the power of music is as a vehicle for prayer, for praise, and for affirming our faith, only if we connect what we know from the Word of God into the way we sing His praise.

We read from John’s account this morning that “The world cannot receive [the Spirit,] because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.” It is knowing here that is important, but again, not just knowing about Him; it is knowing HIM. It is an experiential knowledge shared by the disciples of Christ, one that the world cannot possibly understand, but that we receive the more we come to know Him.

How much strength is there when we gather as the church and proclaim that WE know the Spirit to be near and WE confess His truth together! We will sing at the close of the service, “there’s a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place, AND I KNOW that it’s the presence of the Lord ... there are sweet expressions on each face, AND I KNOW they feel the presence of the Lord.” Our songs proclaim this truth: our understanding of the Word, our coming to know the Lord; all these are connected with our music.

Spirit and truth, inseparably linked – this is worship. This is our calling through our songs, through our prayers, through our liturgy. It is only in this connection with the truth and the WORD of God that we may fully invoke the

presence of His Holy Spirit, and I am so thankful to be standing with a congregation committed to that Word despite the urgings of culture; despite the hatred thrust upon the church today. We continue to stand for His Word and to light the world with our Spirit-filled glow.

Olivia and I were talking a few weeks ago, lamenting a broken situation. It was one of those all-too-common conversations these days where you both end up shaking your heads, not sure how to “resolve” that which for us is impossible to fix. Finally, she said to me, “You know, it’s like people are trying to make life so much more difficult than it has to be.”

These words echoed back to me some days later. It struck me how profound a revelation this is – not simply that people are making life more difficult than it should be, but that there is one at work in the world making EVERYTHING as difficult, disorderly, and muddled as possible. He is grabbing hold of our culture, our media, our desires, our perceptions. He is telling us that it’s over, it’s not worth it, there is no truth, there is no right and wrong. Our lifestyle? It is antiquated and no longer relevant, and why can’t you just “move forward” in the name of progress?

Tragically, that backwards message is being preached from many pulpits across our nation. As church membership started to decline and the culture was turning away from organized religion, some church leaders surmised that the only way to stay afloat was to get with the times, making the church more “attractive” by sacrificing our doctrines and values. Many have since written off undesirable portions of Scripture as “outdated” and “unnecessary,” and in doing so, they have reversed the compass from Christ-centered to culture-centered, following the “god” of public opinion rather than the God of truth.

The theological issues with this mindset are clear. The statistics, however, are just as profound. Membership in these mainline churches continues to tank. There are many reasons for this, but I just don’t believe it’s possible to nourish the people of God with anything other than the pure, complete Word of God: THE Word. How could it possibly be “attractive” to worship in a church preaching the same dying message that is forced upon us through every facet of our culture? How much more appealing is the light of Truth shining from the pure, complete, Spirit-filled Word of God! It is for this reason I am so thankful that Greenwood Church is standing firm in our faith and doctrine. You all are a light to those around us and a rock for one another, in spite of the clamor of our society and even from our own denomination. And it’s not easy – the evil one is making this so much more difficult than it has to be.

This is why we need the Paraclete – the Advocate; the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells us in our reading from John that “the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in [His] name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that [He has] said to you,” and will be His perfect peace within and around you. As the Old Testament fathers were promised the coming of the Messiah, we have the promise of the Spirit advocating for us right here, and right now, if we walk with Him and allow the gifts of worship and music to help us get to know Him.

How often while reading Scripture do you find yourself starting to sing along, remembering a hymn or song you were taught at some stage of your life? Take that power and use it another way: let our music be your toolkit to invite the Holy Spirit into your heart and to drown out the evils around us.

Truth-filled music is a powerful way to welcome the Spirit into every circumstance. I vividly remember walking into high school on a Monday morning with “Lord of the Dance” running through my mind after our choir had offered that piece in worship the day before. School, to me, was a chaotic sea of the brokenness of modern culture. But in that moment, I remembered the peace of having been in the presence of the Spirit in worship the day before, and I felt that presence remain with me through the maze of life.

Take with you the third stanza of our opening hymn – we sang: “Come holy Comforter, Thy sacred witness bear in this glad hour: Thou who almighty art, now rule in every heart, and ne’er from us depart, Spirit of power.” This is a prayer for the Spirit to take hold of our lives, to dwell in us and those around us, and to lend His perfect order to the brokenness of our lives. This is a lifeline, when the temptation of evil seems inevitable and we find ourselves run down and discouraged. But our music reminds us of His truth, the truth which connects us with our Lord, the Word Incarnate, who will fill us with His Spirit of comfort, guidance, and care.

This is what it looks like to “be filled with the Spirit.” It looks like a church gathering week in and week out, retelling our sacred stories, practicing the liturgy that links us with the saints of ages past, living out the truth of the Gospel in love to one another, and remaining steadfast despite a world that seems more and more lost and broken. It is, when we feel the power of temptation and of our own brokenness, to draw in the Holy Spirit, the advocate, to ground us. It is, when we feel lost and broken at war, disease, violence, loss, to allow in the Holy Spirit, the comforter, to dry our tears. And it is, in the hour of worship and every hour that follows, to saturate our singing with truth, to move our hearts through understanding, and to live in such a way that our very being becomes this song of praise from our hearts to the Living God.