

April 10, 2005
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 Psalm 119:97-105, Luke 24:13-32

“The Spirit in the Church”

There is a lot of criticism going around about the church. And why not? It is pretty easy to criticize something that comes in so many forms, styles, sizes and flavors. There is some form of the church that is certain to displease somebody. In his book *Christian Doctrine*, Shirley Guthrie presents a litany of commonplace complaints.

The church is too worldly; or, it's not in touch enough with the real world.

All the church cares about is serving itself; or, it has become too much of a “social welfare organization.”

The church is too liberal; or, it is too conservative.

The church tries to include everybody and stands for nothing; or, it is so intolerant that people just don't feel welcome.

The preacher's sermons are nothing more than vague generalities; or, the preacher's sermons meddle too much in people's personal lives or in social issues.

There is a *New Yorker* cartoon that shows two ministers counting the offering in the sacristy after worship. There are only a few coins in the offering plates that they hold. One minister turns to the other and says, “Well, back to the old vague generalities.”

There is a lot of criticism going around about the church. I should know, because I'm one of the critics. Each of us has our pet peeves. One thing that troubles me is all the mean things that church people say in the name of Jesus. Let me stop right there. If I say too much, then I would have to give you a chance. Once we got started, we would never get out of here!

A deeper issue lies beneath all these complaints about the church. Where is Christ in the church? Do I feel his presence in the church? How can I know his love? Where do I hear his voice speaking to me? There is so much talk about the church because many people do not feel they meet Christ in the church. As a result, disappointment, anger and hurt are expressed as criticisms about other things in the church—some important and some not so important. When we know Christ's presence in the church, we see all these other concerns from a different perspective.

The church of the New Testament wrestled with the question of where the risen Lord is to be found and experienced. The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus speaks to this post-resurrection concern. It was the evening of Easter when two disciples on the road to Emmaus discovered the truth of Christ's promise that whenever two or three gather together in his name, he will be among them.

The risen Lord is found in the fellowship of the church. On the road to Emmaus, two disciples opened up their hearts to one another, shared their disappointments and their dreams and found Jesus among them. The New Testament word for fellowship is "koinonia." Koinonia happens when we open ourselves to the work of the Spirit so that we may be partakers together of the grace of God. Koinonia happens when we share together the common life that God's reconciling love in Jesus Christ makes possible. Koinonia happens not so much when like-minded people get together to form a mutual admiration society, but when diverse people come together to practice forbearance and love. Barbara Brown Taylor has written, "[T]he purpose of community is not to retreat someplace with other like-minded people, but to give ourselves up to the working of the Holy Spirit by learning how to live with people we may not like at all. What better way to open ourselves up to the God beyond our knowing than to begin with the neighbor beyond our knowing?" (p.87, "Deep in Christ's Bones," *Bread of Angels*).

Taylor reminds us that quantum physics teaches the "connectedness" of all things. The world is not a collection of individual parts and pieces but one organism in which each part impacts the other. You cannot touch one part of the whole web without causing a ripple that is ultimately felt throughout all of creation (p. 88, *Bread of Angels*). Koinonia happens when we realize that the church is not a collection of individuals but the body of Christ. We are one body, one spiritual organism, built together in Christ. We get a sense of our oneness in Christ when we take the time to walk in another's shoes. If we could see into each other's hearts, we would find the same kind of hurt and pain, hope and joy that we find in our own hearts. When we have seen ourselves in others and others in us, then we could never speak or act with cruelty or indifference again. Koinonia is not superficial friendliness, but mutual sympathy and concern. Christ comes into the deep abiding fellowship of the community of faith.

Where is the Spirit of Christ to be found in the church? Luke tells us that when the disciples were discussing the events of the past few days, the stranger entered their conversation. He became the teacher. He

explained that the prophets had foretold everything that had happened. He helped them see the scriptures in a new light.

The Bible is the written word of God that makes Jesus Christ, the living word of God, present to us. Christ is not a word written on the page, but the word made real in our hearts that by the Holy Spirit. Calvin spoke of the Bible as pair of glasses that we look through to see God, the world, and ourselves clearly. The Westminster Confession of Faith says that “our full persuasion and assurance” that the scripture is the word of God is “the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts.” When we do not feel Christ’s presence in the church, when we do not know the Spirit’s power in our lives, we need to ask ourselves whether or not we are giving ourselves to the study of scripture. The Bible helps us recognize Christ in others, in ourselves, in the church, and in the world.

I love to teach the Bible not only because the word of God establishes faith, guides our lives, and builds up the body of Christ, but also because I experience the living presence of Christ through teaching. Christ comes to us when we study God’s word together. This year over 170 of our members participated in our Wednesday evening Lenten study, “Wrestling with Scripture.” The purpose of the study was to help us read scripture in community together. As we learn, we appreciate how others bring different experiences and viewpoints to the study of scripture. As we learn to listen respectfully and appreciatively to those whose thoughts and feelings may be different from our own, we gain a deep sense of the presence of Christ with us. It is Christ alone who binds us together as one body in the study of his word.

Where is the spirit of Christ to be found in the church? Luke tells us that when the three travelers approached the village, the two men urged the stranger to stay with them for it was late and the night was upon them. They offered him their hospitality and he accepted. The risen Lord comes to us when we extend the grace of hospitality to others. Christ is present wherever Christians serve others in the name of Christ. Jesus said, “I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me.” The faithful replied, “Lord, when did we do these things?” Jesus said, “Even as you have done unto the least of my brothers and sisters so you have done unto me.”

Sometimes we feel Christ’s presence most powerfully in those moments when we share what we have (and what is needed) with the

stranger. A young pregnant woman, trying to deal with her addiction to drugs and alcohol, found a safe harbor in a small Presbyterian church in a poor neighborhood. She used to come and stand at the door and listen to the congregation sing the hymns. Finally, she was able to come in, sit down, and let them love her. The woman was the writer Anne Lamont who wrote, "The church became my home in the old meaning of *home*—that it's where, when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in. They even said, 'You come back now.'" (p.100, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott) Christ is present in acts of hospitality. How often it happens that we go to help a person with a difficult task and we find that we have been helped. We go to give and we find that we have received far more than we have given. In such moments we meet Christ and we are satisfied.

Where do we find the risen Lord? Luke tells us that when they were at the table, the men saw Jesus repeat the familiar gestures that had marked his ministry. Just as he had done with the multitudes and with the disciples at the Last Supper, he took, blessed, broke and gave the bread to them. Suddenly, their eyes were opened. They saw the Lord. Jesus Christ, the bread of life, was with them, sustaining the church with his own life. In worship, in word and sacrament, Christ is present. Perhaps it is here, in worship, that the Lord, who is everywhere present, comes most clearly into focus. Worship is like narrowing of the hourglass. Everything funnels through this moment and everything flows out of it. Here we bring our needs, disappointments, wounds, hopes and dreams to flow through Christ. Here we let our life experiences pass through Christ. Here we receive his forgiveness, comfort, healing, correction and blessing.

In worship, we come to understand that Christ is not just here, but everywhere taking, blessing, breaking and giving his life for others as he always has. When the disciples saw him at table, they understood why their hearts had burned with excitement on the road. Jesus was with them already, but they could not recognize him. In worship, Christ gives us the eyes to recognize him when we meet him on the road, as we live and share with others.

I remember going to worship as a young boy and sitting with my friends in the balcony. I remember doodling in the bulletin, playing box on the visitor cards and generally annoying those around us. I remember thinking the sermons were too long and the unfamiliar hymns too slow. Yet, something kept bringing me back again and again to worship. It was not something I could name at the time, but it was real. Was it some mystery I could not explain or some holy presence I felt? Now, as I look

back, I see it was Jesus, our Risen Lord, who bound us all together in that moment of worship: restless boys in the balcony, a couple holding hands, a grandfather nodding off, two giggling girls, a row of folks listening intently, a young woman singing her heart out, a five-year-old asleep on his dad's lap. He was among us and within us. Together we were Christ's body, given life and empowered by his Spirit.

When Christ awakens us to his presence, we see all our relationships, our experiences, our living, and our dying from the perspective of his grace. We see the church, so full of human frailty, foolishness and controversy, for what it is—the body of Christ filled with his wondrous Spirit.