

“Spirituality, For Real”  
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Acts 2:1-21

No offense intended to those in the congregation who have worked long and hard to earn one, but we’ve all probably heard the old saw about getting a Ph.D., which has oft been described as a process of learning more and more about less and less until you know absolutely everything about nothing. Well, the same can be true about words, like spirituality. There are so many ideas about what spirituality means that increasingly the word has become diluted to the point of meaninglessness.

People of a Pentecostal bent describe spirituality as an ecstatic event of worship, which may include speaking in tongues, loss of consciousness, and specific physical gestures, such as uncontrollable laughter, lifting up of hands, dancing, or rolling around on the floor. On the opposite end of the spectrum we have the contemplative, whose idea of spirituality is much calmer and quieter. Spirituality for this person comes alive through the stillness of meditation, usually practiced through a strict discipline quite the opposite of Pentecostal spontaneity.

Of course, there’s a vast swath of people for whom spirituality means neither of those experiences. Many people use the word spirituality in a much vaguer sense. Some apply spirituality as an adjective to an especially pleasant emotional state. Others use the word spiritual or spirituality to indicate their nominal interest in transcendent realities, like God. Who here hasn’t heard, or perhaps even said, “I’m not terribly religious, but I consider myself very spiritual.” When pressed to describe what precisely this spirituality consists of, the claimant usually doesn’t have much to say. Perhaps this is because their spirituality is so ineffable as to

be inaccessible to words, or maybe they've just borrowed a popular term to keep from seeming negligent or shallow.

It could be spirituality means all of these things, and more. However, we may need to admit some limits to our language, and be honest about how a solitary word, once it's been assigned so many seemingly contradictory meanings, can become overstuffed until it explodes and becomes incapable of holding meaning anymore. This is not to criticize, judge, or condemn how people use the word spirituality as a descriptor of their varied experiences. Instead, we need to penetrate deeper, go beneath and beyond the surface expression, to find out what it really means to be spiritual. What better day to do this than the Feast of Pentecost? What better place to look than holy scripture, specifically the Acts of the Apostles?

The first thing we're told about the first Pentecost is "they were all together in one place." In the Bible, details usually mean something. The authors of scripture rarely waste words. Hence, we can take this as an indication that community is a cardinal aspect of spirituality. This is not a terribly popular idea among many people who claim to possess some sort of spirituality.

For many, spirituality is a predominantly personal, individual enterprise, with tenuous ties to any grouping of people, and it's true that there are solitary aspects to spirituality. However, scripture consistently emphasizes the primacy of community over the individual. In the lesson read from the twelfth chapter of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we learn "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Not for our individual edification or enjoyment, but the Spirit is given for the common good. It's hard to pursue the common good, when one participates in a community of faith sporadically at best.

Now a few may argue that community does not require actual participation with other people. A truly spiritual community, some claim, transcends the need for personal relationship. The problem with the idea of community without incarnation, the problem with the idea of relationship without embodiment, is that such ideas are Gnostic, not Christian. They deal with abstractions and concepts, rather than realities. The witness of scripture is clear. Community matters. In fact, Jesus left behind nothing – no buildings, no books – nothing but a community. The message of Jesus Christ endures through that community, defined by spirit, yes – but also by flesh and blood.

The second thing we notice in the story of Pentecost is wind and fire, elemental forces of nature employed by the Spirit as a way of being visibly present among the gathered community. The symbolism of these powerful forces could be analyzed until the sun sets, but perhaps more relevant to our exploration of spirituality is what the Spirit does. And in the context of the first Pentecost, the Spirit fosters connection by enabling the disciples to speak in other languages.

Jerusalem was a very cosmopolitan place, a crossroads of culture and commerce. Present at that first Pentecost were Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Egyptians, Libyians, Cretans, Arabs, basically people from every distinct region in the eastern Mediterranean. Many of these people would have been able to speak in the one of the *lingua franca* of the day, namely Greek or Latin. However, on the day of Pentecost, they declared, “in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

What a remarkable miracle, ever since the envy and desperate desire of every student of a foreign language, to converse automatically in a tongue not our own. But even more important, what a blessing of hospitality, that these people, so far from their homes, could hear a special message of grace and wisdom, in their mother tongue. If you have ever travelled abroad to a

place where English is known by few, you know how disorienting it can be, even if you have a working knowledge of the language in use. You also know how good it feels to return home and hear the familiar cadences of your own language. It's like standing under a waterfall on a scorching day. Imagine how those people must have felt, when the disciples let loose, in the home languages of the people, with a message of hope and joy and love and forgiveness. That's the work of a true spirituality.

Spirituality fosters connection with hospitality. It inspires us to speak the language people understand, which sometimes requires us to translate the words and concepts we cherish into a new form that's more accessible, into a form that meets people where they are. Many are suspicious of this endeavor, fearing that translation in an effort to be more relevant will result in loss of integrity, and there is a measure of legitimacy to this concern. However, we must rely upon and trust the Spirit to insure that no nuance is lost in translation to those who otherwise cannot comprehend the first word of the good news that Christ has died and has arisen for the redemption of the world.

What does this mean in practical terms? It means being aware of who we are, and who we are not. It means seeking out those who are not like us and finding out who they are so that we can know how to communicate with them. To get really down and dirty, it means asking ourselves, "Why do people in their 20's and 30's comprise such a small sliver of our congregation, and what can we do about it?" It means asking ourselves, "Why are there five teenagers outside washing cars right now, instead of fifty?" It means asking, "Why is it so white in here?"

Spirituality fosters hospitality, which helps build community. Hospitality converts strangers into friends, and that community is necessary, at least in part, because the spirit evokes

persecution. On that first Pentecost morning, some accused the disciples of being drunk, which was a doubly offensive slur considering it was only nine o'clock in the morning. Today, the charge of inebriation has given way to something else. People operating under the influence of the Spirit can be attacked as unorthodox, heretical, culture-conforming, demon worshipping, or just downright weird. There are always cynics and scoffers and self-righteous Holy Rollers, ready to criticize people enflamed by the Spirit. Well, let me tell you something: their bag of wind ain't got nothing on the wind that moved over the face of the waters at the beginning of creation.

Cynics will abound when people start prophesying. When the young see visions and the old dream dreams, the cynics see opportunity. They thrive on the carnage of ruined reputations and discredited ideas. But true spirituality helps insulate the faithful from the scorn of the irresponsible. The Spirit provides shelter that protects with us peace, so that the vision may live and dream be awakened to reality. The Spirit allows the truth to be told, despite the rage of those who prefer concealment and deception.

That's spirituality, from a biblical perspective. It has less to do with a certain way of feeling, and more to do with a certain way of being, namely in community, with radical hospitality for strangers, so that prophecy and visions and dreams may come to light. Spirituality is not so much about raising your hands or sitting in the lotus position or feeling at one with the universe, though such practices may be helpful for you. Spirituality is about being connected with God and other people, so that together, God and humanity might someday be fully reconciled, and all may be one. None of this is meant to denigrate those who use the word "spirituality" loosely or in a different way, but it is to suggest that how we talk about things that really matter really does matter. And what we learn from scripture is that spirituality opens up

opportunity for relationship with other people in ways that are imminently practical, like being able to speak in a person's home language, and always for the common good. Amen.