

Date: January 25, 2004

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 3

**SERMON: The Church in the Power of the Spirit**

Text(s): 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Luke 4:14-21

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In 1935, the French foreign minister, Pierre Laval was in Moscow on a diplomatic mission. In the course of his conversations with Joseph Stalin, who was in the midst of a rather ferocious crackdown on the Russian Orthodox church, as well as Roman Catholics in the Soviet Union, Laval suggested very diplomatically that Stalin might want to ease up on his suppression of Christians in order to propitiate the Pope.

“The Pope?!” Stalin snorted. “How many divisions has he got?”

Well, a good deal many more than Stalin had or even imagined, apparently, for Stalin and his Soviet Empire have passed from the scene, not with a bang, but a whimper, and the Church in the lands that the former Soviet Union encompassed or controlled is not only alive and well, but growing at a fairly rapid rate.

Two years ago, I attended a pastors’ seminar in Prague. Our meetings were held in a lovely complex of buildings on a beautiful wooded hilltop just outside of Prague. That campus of gorgeous old baroque buildings began its life as the military headquarters of the Hapsburg empire in the wars against Napoleon. It again became the general staff headquarters for the Austro-Hungarian empire during World War I. In World War II, the Gestapo took it over and the cellars of the main administration building heard the screams of those interrogated by torture and the gunshots that frequently ended their torture. During the Cold War, the Czech secret police took it over as their headquarters, and because of its proximity to the border with Austria, used it as their center for apprehending, torturing and executing those who decided to escape from the Communist paradise and seek a new life in the West. Today, in the buildings that heard so many anguished screams, saw such

depths of human cruelty, despair, and lonely death, a different sort of army is being trained and a different strategy for changing the world is being plotted. That lovely campus on the hillside on the outskirts of Prague is a Protestant seminary, where about 150 young people, most of them from the lands formerly behind the Iron Curtain are preparing to go out in the power of the Spirit and proclaim good news to the poor and release to the captives and liberation for the oppressed.

What can account for such a turnaround in such a relatively short period of historical time? I don’t think it’s just the sort of ordinary or cyclical vicissitudes of history working themselves out. I believe it’s due to the activity of God’s Holy Spirit lived out through the lives of the community of people we call the church. Stalin was right in one sense, of course; the church has no armies, no Apache attack helicopters or smart bombs or nuclear deterrents. And even though during the Middle Ages, the Church did strive for temporal power and glory, it has long since abandoned that quest. What the church does possess, however, is something much more intangible, yet nonetheless real. It is that something we might call, in the language of our texts this morning, the power of the Holy Spirit. This is not the result of institutional Christian triumphalism; Lord knows, we’ve had our share of that too, and it’s always come to an end the same as the rule of tyrants like Napoleon and Hitler and Stalin have come to an end. Rather it’s the story of the church as a transformed and transforming human community. The clue to these facts, at least some of them, may be found in our lessons today.

Jesus declares his vocation in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth, using a text from the prophet Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and liberation for the oppressed.*

That text tells us two important things: it

gives us a picture of what God's program for the world is. God's program for humanity, if you will, is one of justice, healing, and liberation. God wants human life to be. . . well, *humane*. This passage and many others like it in the prophets are why various theologians have spoken of "God's preferential option for the poor." God is on the side of the underdog, God favors those who are on the bottom of the heap rather than those who are on the top. Although, perhaps that oversimplifies it; in fact, as we very well know, but constantly forget, it is often those at the top of the heap, at least as the world counts being at the top, who are truly bound and blinded by chains of their own making, and both oppressed and oppressors need to be liberated.

But if liberation for the oppressed and good news to the poor are God's program, it is through human beings filled and empowered by God's spirit, that God's program gets carried out. It was the Spirit of God in Jesus that made him who he was. And yet, it is not the action of a spiritual superstar, a heroic individual. Even Jesus chose others to be with him, to become a new community empowered by the Spirit.

St. Paul understood this very well, and he argues the case eloquently in his letter to the Christians in Corinth. Apparently the Corinthian church has sent some questions to Paul about the proper way to understand the gifts of the Holy Spirit, because there have been misunderstandings that have resulted in a chaotic and abusive situation in the congregation there. From Paul's reply, we learn that God's spirit is being treated as a possession of individuals that gives them superior status over their fellow Christians. Paul's rebuttal of this notion is clear: "*There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of ministries, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of spiritual powers, but the same God who activates them all in everyone. To each is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*"

And then he goes on to argue in our

passage this morning, that it is the whole church, the whole community of believers, which is gifted and graced by the Holy Spirit to represent and embody the risen Christ. No one individual's gifts are sufficient to truly represent Christ. *The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'* . . . *God has so arranged the body. . . that there may be no dissension within it, but the members may have the same care for one another. . . Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.*

To really hear what St. Paul is saying, we may first have to step outside our western mind set for a moment if we can. In our culture which makes the individual a virtual universe in microcosm, we tend to think of spirituality as a purely private, personal, and individual thing. There is a menu of spiritual choices out there, and we choose the various dishes from the menu that provide us with a personally nourishing spiritual meal.

But there is no evidence that St. Paul or any other writer of the New Testament ever conceived of the Christian faith in such individualistic terms. He knew, even if we have forgotten it, that human beings are never isolated individuals; we always exist in community. To be human is to be related to other people, and to the earth itself. To be truly humane, human life must be lived in relationship to others, relationships characterized by mutuality and care for one another. The community to which we belong shapes and molds us through its beliefs and practices and customs, so that the persons we are as individuals, the way we know ourselves to be and the way we understand and think about our relationship to the world around us, the beliefs we hold and what we regard as real, are to a large extent, the result of that communally-formed shaping process.

We all belong to a number of different communities— the community of our family, our school, our town, our culture, our nation, and

each of those communities has this power to mold and shape our individual and collective identity and behavior. We don't have to struggle to see what kind of spiritual powers are at work within some of the communities of which we're a part, do we? The results are only too visible— families split apart by abuse, by cruelty, by infidelity. An epidemic of pornography on the Internet. Ethnic or religious rivalries that perpetrate horrific acts of terrorism and violence— violence that is particularly revolting in that it is often carried out in the name of God. (I like the bumper sticker where God says, "You did WHAT in my name!?" ) We know what it's like to be part of a community where millions are without health care, where people are reduced to economic units and used or discarded at the dictate of the almighty bottom line. We glimpse the power of evil spirits in the reply of the Chicago doctor Richard Seed who when asked why he wanted to clone human beings, arrogantly and contemptuously replied, "You can't stop science," as though science were some omnipotent Deity to which we must all bow down. We see it in the degradation of our political life, where true political discourse has given way to an overweening concern for image and sound bites.

We desperately need to be part of a different community, where the spiritual powers at work shaping and molding us are the powers that give liberty to the oppressed and good news to the poor and recovery of sight to the blind. A community where each cares for the other for the good of all. A community where every individual's spiritual gifts are needed in order for the whole to function effectively. Gifts, not only of preaching, teaching, and healing, but gifts of intercessory prayer, gifts of encouraging others who are discouraged, gifts of generosity in giving, gifts of caring service to those in need.

At the American Church in Paris, we had a fairly large group of Filipinos, the majority of whom were women, and many, though well-

educated, worked as nannies or domestic housekeepers and consequently had very low incomes. Yet, I would not be exaggerating in the least to say that the Filipino Fellowship was the heart of that congregation. I never saw anyone who had such an understanding of the importance of each member putting their gifts in service to the whole body. Without any fanfare, and without the knowledge of most of the other members, a group of Filipinos would turn up on a Saturday several times a year to give the sanctuary a good thorough dusting and polish the woodwork. At their Sunday luncheons and Bible study after church, they had the most remarkable ministry of hospitality to people that were the sort who often turn up in large cities— people who were alone, newly arrived refugees from Africa, lonely American or European college students, recently divorced people at loose ends and searching desperately for some human connection, whoever seemed to need some other human being to notice them. They would be brought in, fed a meal, talked to, included in the Bible study after lunch, made to feel valued and accepted. They helped us be the church in the power of the Spirit because they had such a deep understanding of what it meant to be a community in which every individual's gifts was put to work for the common good.

When we become part of the community of the risen Lord, we enter a world where the Spirit of God is at work, the same life-giving Spirit raised Jesus from the dead, graciously giving individuals all the gifts and graces necessary to transform the face of human life and relationships. The powers at work in this community are not the powers at work in the old community of humanity— violence, greed, arrogance, or lust for power, but rather powers like love, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, mutual encouragement, prophetic courage and hope.

A transformed community, the body of Christ, has a transforming mission. I like the

definition evangelist Tom Skinner once gave: he said that the church is called to be “a visible model on earth of what’s happening in heaven.” That’s it. It’s what we pray for each Sunday when we say the Lord’s Prayer together, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” and praying that prayer is a politically subversive act. We are praying that God’s will, God’s rule, God’s justice will become manifest in the world and that it will supplant the dominance and the injustice of the powers of this world. In praying that prayer, we are implicitly committing ourselves to practice what we pray for. We are committing ourselves to be transformed in our own life and relationships, and we are committing ourselves to become agents of transformation in the world. The world will learn what it means to be truly human when it sees a community of humans in which humane relationships are embodied. In other words, the church is not just another organization; we are, more precisely, an organism. We are a living body, the body of Christ. And the extent to which the world will see and know the transforming power of God’s new creation will be the extent to which we embody that new creation in our life together.