

Get in the Game: Team Spirit

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

We are in a short sermon series called “Get in the Game.” I’m trying to make the case that every...single...person in this room has been created, called and gifted by God to play an absolutely unique role in God’s Kingdom. So unique that IF you don’t play your part, we will be missing something very important in our mission. And as I said, playing our position in the game always begins with a call from the Coach: “You’re in!”

Last week we looked at two different responses to that call. Isaiah whose response was, “Here I am; send me!” And Moses’ whose response was a little less enthusiastic: “Oh my Lord, please, send someone else!” I shared a moment when I was way more like Moses than Isaiah. It was when my football team was being CRUSHED by an inner-city school called Washington. They were wiping up the field with us. So, when the coach called out and asked me if I wanted to go in for quarterback, my not-very-heroic response was, “No!” Not even, “No thank you, coach.” Just, “No!” No...I did NOT want to walk into the meat grinder that was Washington Junior High School.

This was MY Moses story; MY example of what it’s like to say “No” to the call. You all chuckled politely but some of you might have thought I was exaggerating a bit for effect ... not that I would EVER do such a thing. Well, I want to share with an Email I received later that day from a Chapel Hill friend who was out of town but had read my blog:

Did I ever tell you I played football one year on the Washington football team in Yakima? My year ended during a scrimmage against the first team offense (I was a linebacker) attempting to tackle a ferocious running back twice my size. I did make the tackle (only because the coach told me I was toast if I didn’t play more aggressively).....however...a broken ankle was my reward.

Reading your blog....I could feel your pain. And they were my teammates.

See...I wasn’t exaggerating at all! Playing against those guys was brutal...and terrifying. BUT...to have lined up with that big running back in MY backfield! Now THAT would have been a different story.

As we are talking about getting in the game of God’s mission for us, I want to say this: Not only have we got the biggest, toughest guy on our team...remarkably, that guy lives inside of us! We are capable of WAY more than we could ever imagine because we are playing with power and gifts that are beyond us; that are supernatural. Literally.

Our reading this morning comes from Paul's letter to the Corinthian church. The Corinthians were a very immature, very enthusiastic...and VERY disordered bunch of new Christians. They wrote Paul asking LOTS of questions about their life together and Paul answered in his letters to them. In this reading from chapter 12, you will be tempted to focus on the "charismatic" gifts they had been given as a church. The word "Charismatic" comes from two Greek words- "charis" which means "grace" and "mata" which means "gifts." Grace-gifts. These grace-gifts are impressive and mysterious and supernatural. And we will talk about them...next week. But THIS week, I want you to pay attention to the GIVER of those gifts... the one I referred to in my Blog this week as our "Secret Sauce." Keep your eyes open; he appears 9 times in this reading. There will be a test. I Cor 12: 1; 4-13

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.... Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body— Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

So...what...or rather, WHO...is the Secret Sauce that makes weak people strong and ordinary people extraordinary? Who is the gift-giver that takes common pew-sitters and turns them into one-of-a-kind champions of God's mission? The Holy Spirit, of course.

I mentioned this in my blog: Presbyterians have an uncomfortable relationship with the Holy Spirit. We know He's real, we know we need him, we want the forgiveness and sanctification that only He can provide...but we start getting nervous when we let Him off the leash. Like the secret sauce...we want a little bit...but not too much.

And in some ways, there are good reasons to be a little wary. We are Presbyterians and not Pentecostals because we think that TOO much focus on the Holy Spirit can become hysterical and unbalanced. We can focus so much on the Holy Spirit that it puts Jesus in the shadows...setting him aside. A good, biblical theology of the Holy Spirit always exalts Jesus. As Dale Bruner put it, the Holy Spirit is the "shy" member of the Trinity, more interested in lifting up Jesus than drawing attention to himself.

Still, I want to teach about the Holy Spirit this evening/morning because I believe that Presbyterians who take the Holy Spirit seriously can be a powerful force for the Kingdom. When we combine our

exaltation of Jesus and our devotion to the Bible with a true openness to the Holy Spirit...that is some powerful mojo.

So, based upon our text and a few more passages, I want to offer a refresher course on the person and work of the Holy Spirit. And at the end, I want to invite us to ask for more of Him! Because we can ALWAYS use more of the Holy Spirit...and we will never accomplish the work to which Jesus calls us without Him.

Lesson 1: The Holy Spirit is a person, not a force. We who grew up on Star Wars are familiar with one of the most repeated lines in that saga: what is it? "May the force be with you!" The force in Star Wars is just that...an impersonal power for good. An influence like moral gravity which causes the good guys to win in the end.

The Holy Spirit is way more than a spiritual force. He is a person. We know this from the way the New Testament describes Him. (And by the way, that's why we don't refer to the Holy Spirit as an "it." It is "Him". Or, if you really want to get crazy, "Her." Some scholars suggest that the nurturing, creative aspects of the Holy Spirit suggest that the Spirit is an expression of the feminine side of God. THAT will stir some of you up!)

But back to my point. The way the Spirit is described in the New Testament underscores the personhood of the Spirit. In our text, verse 11, we are told that the Holy Spirit gives out gifts as He wills. In other words, the Spirit is a thinking, volitional person. We are told elsewhere that the Spirit loves, that the Spirit can be insulted and that the Spirit can be grieved. An impersonal force experiences none of these emotions; only a person can.

Lesson 2: The Holy Spirit is divine. In other words, the Spirit is God. We talk about God being a Trinity by which we mean a single God who reveals himself in three persons: God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We find this hinted at in verse 4:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same **Spirit**; and there are varieties of service, but the same **Lord**; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same **God** who empowers them all in everyone.

Did you see the allusion to the Trinity? Spirit, Lord (Jesus is Lord) and God (God the Father.) We find this teaching more obviously in other places in the New Testament such as the Great Commission where Jesus commands his followers to baptize people in the name of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

My point is simply this: Holy Spirit is not merely God's Spiritual butler, doing his bidding, tidying things up on earth. The Holy Spirit is God with us! In fact, Jesus once told his disciples that he HAD to go back to the Father so that Spirit could come and dwell with us. Jesus could only be one place at one time; that was a limit of the Son of God taking on human form. But the Holy Spirit can be everywhere at all times. When we ask Jesus to come into our heart, it is the Holy Spirit we are

inviting. When we speak of being sanctified...that is, God at work making us more and more like Jesus...that is the work of the Holy Spirit.

So, the Holy Spirit is a person, the Holy Spirit is divine and Lesson 3: the Holy Spirit is generous. He is the gift-giver. That's the point Paul makes through this entire passage. It is the Spirit who gives spiritual gifts to build up the Church. Some of them are more "normal" gifts such as administration or generosity or encouragement. Some are more spectacular like miracles or healings or speaking in unknown tongues. But it is the Holy Spirit who does the giving. And as I mentioned earlier, it is the Holy Spirit who parcels them out according to HIS will and purpose. The Spirit is the one who decides which of us need which gifts in order to make the Church work just right.

But here's the punchline: EVERY ONE of us has at least one spiritual gift. Verse 7 says: To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. Peter says the same thing in his first letter: "As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another..." I'm not talking here about your natural abilities or passions, those you were born with. Those are part of the way God created you. But beyond that, every single Christian...do you hear me...every single believer in Jesus has at LEAST one spiritual gift...one charismaton...given you by the Holy Spirit. Not for you to hoard, but for you to use. Which means...if you are NOT using YOUR spiritual gift for the good of God's mission...you are holding out on us! On what God has called you to do.

Finally, Lesson 4: The Holy Spirit is unchanging. He is the same today as He was 2000 years ago...as He was at the moment of creation when we are told that the "Spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep." The Spirit is unchanging; He is eternally God, eternally creative, eternally generous, eternally Holy. Which means, the Holy Spirit is STILL the giver of spiritual gifts to His Church for the good of His mission.

There are some who don't believe this. They think that the Holy Spirit spigot was turned off at some point in history. That every miraculous and supernatural gift ceased after the age of the Apostles. That means no healings, no miracles, not tongues, no interpretation of tongues, no prophecy. All that belongs to a bygone age. This is called Cessationism.

Let me just say as clearly as I know how: there is NOTHING in the Bible that teaches this. Nothing that suggests that the Holy Spirit was more FREE to be generous with gifts back then than he is now. Nothing to suggest that the miraculous came to an end with the death of the last apostle, as some teach, or with the formation of the Bible, as others teach...and frankly, which is a kind of weird reason to offer.

Let me also say this: I'm Presbyterian. So I was raised in a more buttoned down type of tradition. As I said, those of our ilk tend to be suspicious of the ooey-woeey kinds of things we find in more Pentecostal churches. We tend to look to the Bible as our only source of truth and teaching...which is a good thing. BUT...I think part of this has to do with our control issues. If we really believe that the Holy Spirit still gives gifts that are...a little weird... it means that we aren't as in control as we think we are. It means that God might do some pretty strange stuff that is beyond our understanding, beyond our manipulation and...well, beyond the pale. When we are so afraid of the Spirit moving outside our

box that we aren't willing to allow God to be God...I think we are on unsteady ground. We are at risk of "quenching" the Spirit, as Paul warned us not to do.

On the other hand, there are those who claim that unless you speak in tongues, you are not a Christian. This is manifestly wrong...and you can prove so from Paul's own teaching when he said, "Do all speak in tongues?" and his implied answer is, "No!"

But...when a person says, "The Holy Spirit does not work that way anymore" ... I really want to step back away from him. Who are WE to say how the Holy Spirit works? Who are WE to say that the Holy Spirit CANNOT work in the way He once did. Really? Doesn't being God mean that you can do ...well...whatever you want to do?

Don't get me wrong. That doesn't mean this makes it easier or less uncomfortable for me. I still don't get it. I'm not a tongue-speaker. I'm not a Spirit-gifted pray-er whose touch heals people instantaneously...at least not yet. But there are people in the Body who ARE gifted in that way. People who DO possess one or more of the supernatural gifts of the Spirit. And if that is true, do we REALLY want to say to those people, "We Presbyterians have no need of THOSE kinds of spiritual gifts. Go hang out with the Assembly of God folks. We'll keep things more decent and orderly around here."

When we went to the Alpha Conference in London, we had a session of prayer. We were invited to ask the Holy Spirit to fill us anew; to give us more of himself. They described their approach to the Holy Spirit as "naturally supernatural." I liked that. But one guy...the pastor of a huge church and someone I really liked... did NOT like it. Not at all. Too much Holy Spirit. It was going to be a deal-breaker for him.

Too bad. Because I don't think we CAN get too much of the Holy Spirit, do you? Personally? As a church? Some pastors teach that you must have a second filling of the Holy Spirit to really be saved. That's not what Paul said. In Ephesians 5:18, Paul commanded us to be "continuously filled" with the Holy Spirit. In other words, not just once. Not just twice. But again and again and again. Why? Because, we leak! We leak the Spirit. That's why we do a benediction after every service. As a refill.

And it's why nearly every day I start my morning by asking the Holy Spirit to fill me up. Again. To give me more and more of himself. I need all the Holy Spirit I can get. That doesn't mean I understand it all. Or that I'm not a little uncomfortable with the possibilities. It means that I realize that I...we ...this church...cannot POSSIBLY be all God intends us to be or do all God intends us to do unless we are filled by his Spirit, cleaned by his Spirit, transformed by His Spirit, gifted by his Spirit. I want more. I want YOU to want more. And so...we are going to close this message with a time of prayer.

Open hands. Lay on your lap. Simple prayer. Come Holy Spirit. Start by me praying a simple but ancient prayer:

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Thy faithful and enkindle in them the fire of Thy love.
Send forth Thy Spirit and they shall be created.
And Thou shalt renew the face of the earth.