

SERMON - "Open to and Cooperating with God's Spirit."

This Pentecost season we remember how God's Spirit encourages and strengthens, as well as corrects & guides us! Our scriptures warn not to ignore God's leading, speaking of **3 dangers: resisting..., quenching... and grieving God's Spirit...** These temptations turn us away from God's loving presence. **The Bible urges us to be more open to God's presence** in our life, in God's church/world! Our choice is seen in a vision from Revelation, ch. 3. Jesus knocks at the door of our life..., inviting us to let God enter and transform us! Trusting God is like inviting a faithful friend to share our joys & heartaches. This message was given to the church in Laodicea because God was disappointed in their "**lukewarm faith.**" These Christians were prosperous but content with a watered-down discipleship. Notice Jesus knocks, but does not break down our door. As individuals & God's church, we can open ourselves wider to God's influence. The Methodist Church has a wonderful motto. "**Open minds, open hearts & open doors!**" Jesus invites us to respond to God's loving presence & be more welcoming toward all others...!

Today the Bible calls us to remove each roadblock to faith! In Acts, Stephen urges religious leaders to **give up stubborn resistance** to Jesus. Pharisees rejected the Lord who challenged their legalistic, mean spirited religion, opposing the Savior they had long anticipated. How tragic were their stubborn hearts! **We can fall into** the same dynamic of blind eyes & calloused hearts. We humans too often resist change, even when change is desperately needed. Being religious is simply not enough. Our Lord desires lives overflowing with compassion & churches - joyfully focused on faithfulness! The story of Nicodemus does offer hope! Nicodemus was a Pharisee, yet came to Jesus, searching with an open mind. Unlike Paul's dramatic turn-around, Nicodemus' transformation was gradual! Both conversions were deep & lasting. Jesus explains to Nicodemus: God's Spirit works within us, offering a rebirth and a new way to live & relate!

When I served on Presbytery's Hunger Committee, I had the privilege of knowing Cindy Corel, Presbytery's missionary to Haiti. She was a Stanton newspaper reporter who sold everything she owned to follow God's call into mission! Even though Haiti faces many challenges, she loves and respects the people and was delighted to serve there! Sadly, Cindy now will serve in neighboring Dominican Republic due to Haiti's violence. On a Presbytery mission trip to Haiti years ago, I saw God's Spirit at work in believers despite overwhelming poverty & injustice. I especially remember the night I arrived in Port-au Prince. It was rush hour, and the road was clogged with every type of vehicle including horse drawn carts and scooters. Then the traffic **slowed even more to a crawl** as something was blocking one of the lanes. As we inched closer, a church service was causing the traffic jam! Light & worshippers were overflowing from a poor but large city church which could not contain all the people. The congregation was **spilling out the door, down the steps, across the sidewalk** and **blocking** a lane of traffic! And yet, no one stuck in traffic was impatient, but quietly waited. We all could hear believers singing with joy! I was deeply moved both by the worshippers' commitment & the commuters' respect for such devotion. May God's Spirit lead us to overflow with joy, generosity, and devotion today and every day! **Like those devout Haitian believers' response to Christ, like Nicodemus opening his life to Jesus, and just as Cindy Corel answers God's call, we also can joyfully answer, "YES!"** wherever the Bible and God's Spirit leads!

Next we hear Paul plead with Thessalonian Christians to not quench God's Spirit! Sometimes after we open the door to God's love, we sabotage living a full and faithful Christian life.

Perhaps it is fear of losing control or perhaps we hesitate to trust God completely. Whatever the reason, we can throw cold water on the fire God is building w/ our faith. Not only in churches, but in businesses and universities, I have seen people stubbornly oppose good, loving, and just efforts which please God! Phil Jackson, the legendary Laker's basketball coach, wrote a book explaining how even gifted athletes often let over inflated egos harm a team's common good!

In Christ's church, teamwork and following God leads to amazing results! Today's scriptures ask us to let God deepen our faith, expanding our love for others. We will sing a favorite hymn inviting God's presence to **"fall afresh on us."** Praying: **"Change me & mold me, fill me & use me, Spirit of the living God!"** May we open ourselves to God & not "quench" God's Spirit!

The third warning speaks deeply to me: **"Grieving the Spirit."** Angry childhood words my brother and I used against one another deeply grieved our father. I remember his pain whenever my brother and I mistreated each other. Paul urges Christian brothers & sisters in Thessalonica to not grieve God's heart by divisions, anger outbursts, gossip, slander and bitterness. May we not grieve the Spirit by disrespect and exclusion of others in our communities, nation & world. The racial turmoil in our nation today has roots in 400 years of injustice and will only be healed by respect & practicing justice for all. God's Spirit unites us despite differences just like on the day of Pentecost. In contrast, fear and hate, prejudice and greed divide people and grieve God!

Finally, Galatians, chapter 5, explains how God's Spirit changes us! The last church I served shared hanging tomato plants in our community. The scripture about "fruits of the Spirit" was attached to encourage everyone to grow in faith: Patience, kindness & generosity; gentleness & faithfulness describe how God nourishes our Christian lives. Allow God's Spirit operating room in our lives and church family, and then watch the compassion and justice grow! God's presence changes us! This spring's abundant rain produced waves of blossoms, flowers, and all things green! May we soak in God's presence, allowing seeds of Biblical faith to produce a stunning harvest! The critical choices for each of us are: **Resist God's influence... or be open to a new way of living** following Jesus! **Either we quench the Spirit's flame, ... or cooperate with God's plans** for our lives and the church... The choice is **between grieving our Creator** with stubborn sins and divisions....**or overflowing with Christ-like love!**

My wife, Sally, led an online course for seminary students on summer internships. One of her Yale Seminary students had served 15 years in prison! George shared his faith journey **"from jail to Yale."** He entered a prison cell bitter, broken & angry with nothing but an Upper Room devotional in it. God's Spirit spoke through those scriptures and simple stories of daily faith to transform his life from anger to love, from hopelessness to deep trust in God. George experienced the living God, who continues to give him peace, forgiveness, and purpose in life. He completed a degree in religious studies while in prison and went on to seminary to serve God and people. His summer internship involved a ministry to reduce street violence and offer God's hope to young people in Bridgeport, Connecticut. As we are receptive, God's Spirit can cultivate in us: **faithfulness, patience & kindness; love, joy and peace; generosity, self-control & gentleness...** Today and every day, let us be open and receptive to God's Spirit in our lives and church!... **Take a moment to reflect: What fruits of the Spirit are growing deeply within you? Which fruits do you want to cultivate? What roadblocks to a deeper faith do you face? AND what might you do to be more open to God's leading?**