

## **"THE SHAPE OF SPIRITUAL EMPOWERMENT"**

Sermon Series, #2: Great Texts, Core Truths

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It humbles me to ponder such a charge. But it is a worthy goal, and I am called to it as your pastor. That with as many of you as I might get to know, and as many of you who might be open to it, I would share with you my goals for your own personal walk with God. Clearly, I'll never fulfill such a lofty, ambitious undertaking. But it is too much to expect all of us to find our way all on their own. That is what our Gospel lesson is about. How Jesus had mentored the disciples. And how he would not always be with them, but how they would find their way in the future.

Perhaps some examples are in order. When I was pastor in Columbus, Ohio we had a weekly visitor named David. Over lunch, inviting him to join the church, he identified a problem. David was an atheist. That threw me for a bit of a loss. But I only smiled, "David, you're here weekly, like clockwork. If God is not real to you, what do you get out of it? Why bother?" I'll never forget his answer: "there is no other place that talks about the things you talk about at church. No other place that does the things you do here at church." He was talking about our interest in the origin and destiny of life, our interest in living the virtues that help us become God's beloved children, feeding the hungry and building homes with the poor.

So what was my goal with David, the rational materialist scientific researcher? To help him see that we came from God, return to God, and that every goodness in between is a gift of God; that we humans can't sustain the good apart from God. And that Jesus Christ is mysteriously and wonderfully at the center of all of that.

Well, alright, that is an extreme example. But more common varieties abound. Many feel as though because you don't know the Bible by chapter and verse or your Christian belief structure is far from complete, that your faith isn't legitimate. What is my goal for such a person? Maybe something like, remember how Jesus put a child in the disciples midst to remind us that faith is a matter of simple trust. More essential than what we know about God is to trust what he knows about us. But also let's open the Bible and rehearse the basics of the Christian take on life.

Much of my work on spiritual goals with my people has to do with the affiliations we bring into church. For example, across the 35 years and the 5,957 members I've served in seven churches, I recall a Zen Buddhist, a 12 step AA veteran, and a rabid America-first patriot. What would such a diverse group have in common?

In each case, they would hear the Christian message and translate it into Zen Buddhism, AA language or American nationalism to make sense of it. In each case, I said, "I'll know that you're getting somewhere in your walk with God when following Jesus makes sense of helpful truth you've gleaned from Zen Buddhism, AA, or being an American, and not the other way around." I don't expect anyone

to forsake any place where you find goodness and truth. I will ask you to put first-order truth first, so God's way temper other ways in your spiritual transformation.

I begin here not because I'm so insightful or have a magic wand. I begin here to make the point that as your pastor I know it is too much to expect you to find your spiritual way alone by yourselves. How do I know that? I know it because it's also true of me. I have been part of a circle of pastors for 30 years now. This group is my answer to the question: where does a pastor go to find his pastoral direction? You see, I'm no different than any of you. We're accountable to each other. They help me see what I would otherwise miss. We just spent two days in York, ME together in worship, prayer and sharing. They help me see beyond myself. I cannot find my way alone. Of course, our mutual care requires trusting vulnerability.

Our mission of being and making disciples cannot be done in the vacuum of our own hearts and minds. Christianity is a community thing, not an individual thing. That's why in the moment God created our Christian faith, God made the church.

That is worth emphasizing, living as we do in a land advancing the lie that we can make it on our own; that if we go deep into our heart of hearts, if we travel to Nepal, if we ride a motorcycle off into the mountains, all will be revealed; all is within our reach. Such sentimental glop as this kills off genuine spirituality, reducing faith to self-serving lifestyle choices. Faith in God goes deeper than lifestyle choices. Faith in God is a foundational way of life for approaching the rest of life.

Let me ask you a question. Would you trust a brain surgeon, a civil engineer, or a rocket scientist who claimed to be essentially self-taught, alone by themselves? I wouldn't consent to that surgery, cross that bridge, or sit in that space capsule. Well, guess what, being a Christian, I mean being a human being like Jesus was a human being, is much more difficult than any of those lofty and worthy callings.

Next Sunday we will gladly receive a goodly number of bright new faces at FCC. And I declare to them what I also offer you. We can only appreciate the gifts God gives us, and the places and ways where God would have us deploy them, as we come together in discernment. So this is not just me projecting that Spirit of truth Jesus announced to his followers before he was taken from them. It could be Marnie Smith or John Wygal saying to a confirmand, "Have you ever thought about becoming a teacher? Becoming a nurse? Becoming an ordained pastor?"

Clearly, the church's situation today has changed in recent decades. Pastoral leadership is no longer about programming a church in the sense of keeping it busy with general activities. No, today we must be more intent upon shaping Christians or it will never happen. We need nothing so much as empowerment, and that comes from leadership. It comes from discernment. It comes from trust.

Seriously, if we seek empowerment we learn to trust and depend on God's Spirit. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus called this enduring Spirit of Christ he bequeathed

upon us our “advocate”. Jesus promised this Holy Spirit would do many things for us: teach us, guide us, encourage us, unify us, convict us as we do wrong, seal upon our hearts our belovedness as God’s children, activate special spiritual gifts within us, give us boldness, energize us, empower us and transform us. Apart from the Spirit of God, apart from this power of God, friends, we can do nothing.

The next time you’re at Roton Point or Weed Beach this summer, do me a favor. Look out on the Sound. Spy a sailboat on the water. Fix your gaze on its course. It is silently elegant and almost poetic in its movement, isn’t it? God’s Spirit is like the wind animating those vessels. It’s invisible, you can’t see it. But you see the results, the difference it makes, how it will take us to unexpected and new places.

So ask yourself this (now the homework portion of the sermon.) Are you willing to inquire into new ways in which the Spirit might come alive within you? Are you willing to put your self-agenda aside to let a group or leader come alongside you to see how God might work within you in ways to which you might now be blind?

Could you embrace practices like prayer, study, mentoring, forgiveness, service and compassion as openings through which God’s Spirit might flow anew in you? To fulfill our spiritual stature, we need empowerment. We can no sooner give ourselves all of the power and grace that we need alone by ourselves than we can sit upon our own lap. We hunger for spiritual food beyond ourselves, what we know, what already occurs to us, the standards we would make for ourselves.

Maybe this is a good moment to get to this table and remember who we are. Amen.

O God, your Spirit is entwined with ours in ways we can scarcely fathom: you are the vine, we are the branches. As we remain immersed in your inexhaustible love and depth we are given strength and joy in life. We praise you, God, that you have given all people the precious gift of your Spirit. We pray that we might experience the Spirit's presence more fully for we can see ahead of us but dimly, hear but faintly, and hardly feel the brush of your sheltering wings all around us. To those who remain suspicious of this joy in your presence, come, O Spirit, with love like wine. To those whose lives remain untouched by hope, come, O Spirit, bearing the mysterious suggestions of dreams and visions of a future with you. To those too much caught up in the small circle of self-concern, come as fire and kindle compassion as intense and transforming as that of the Jesus we follow. To those who feel unworthy of being your servants, O Spirit, come as gracefully as the cooling breezes upon the waters and claim us with your mysterious grace.