



Living with Spirit

Romans 8:5-11

Brett Younger
Senior Minister

September 3, 2017

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

CONNECT  GROW  SERVE

Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it doesn't submit to God's law—indeed it can't, and those who are in the flesh can't please God.

But you aren't in the flesh; You're in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who doesn't have the Spirit of Christ doesn't belong to Christ.

But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through the same Spirit that dwells in you.

When I was a freshman at Baylor University I received a notice in my mailbox explaining that since it was Parents' Weekend, dinner on Friday would be a picnic—fried chicken on the quadrangle—except for those students whose parents were not coming. These orphan students were instructed to go to the cafeteria as usual for Thursday's leftovers.

This did not seem fair. Neither my parents, who lived in Ohio, nor my roommate's parents, who lived nearby but needed some time away from him, were going to be able to come. But why should we be locked away like Cinderella while there was a party going on?

Our righteous indignation led to a courageous act of civil disobedience. It sounded like the right thing to do, but by the time we got in line for chicken, we were afraid that the kitchen staff was about to catch us.

I imagined a woman in a hairnet shouting, "Where are your parents? Your parents aren't here. Security!"

I decided to outsmart them. Just before I was given a drumstick I shouted to no one, “Mom, I’ll be right there.” Then a surprising thing happened.

A woman I had never met shouted back, “I’m over here, son.”

What would possess someone to claim me as her son? She turned out to be another student there without her parents. Ashley Thornton and I have been friends for thirty-eight years. I saw her two weeks ago. She called me “Son.”

I called her “Mom.”

You know people like Ashley, who live with energy, sparkle, and spirit. Just a few years ago, Ashley wrote this poem:

Stay awake!

This might be the day

you see the neon edge of a cloud at sunrise.

It might be the day the moon looks like a smile in the sky.

Stay awake!

You might sing out loud with Mavis Staples today.

You might hear your husband’s heartbeat.

You might find that the perfect black pen costs less than \$2.00.

Stay awake!

You might hug someone.

You might take a hot shower today.

You might sign your name with particular flair today.

Stay awake!

You might laugh so hard your sides hurt today.

You might discover honey-crisp apples.

This might be the day a hairy dog jumps in your lap
and licks your whole face.

Stay awake!

You might smell onions cooking today.

You might eat soup.

Family Circus might actually be funny today.

You might fall in love today

with all the people at the grocery store—
especially the little woman in the pink double-knit pants
who is marching purposefully through the misty rain,
wearing a plastic grocery bag over her hair-do,
the handles hanging down around her ears like giant,
dangling, hoop earrings.

Stay awake!

You might live today!

Some people live every day. Others do not ever seem to be awake. Sometimes we are the ones celebrating life and other times we are in the crowd that is asleep.

What is the difference? Are the dull days the real ones or are the singing, hugging, laughing, and falling in love days the ones that count?

We spend too many days without a sense of Spirit, suffocating beneath mountains of paper work, trying to get computers to do what we are sure they have done before, writing things on our to-do list so we can mark them off because we have not gotten to the things we are supposed to be doing.

We let the mundane take over our lives. We convince ourselves that this day is not important so it is okay to sleepwalk through it. We are waiting until we get through the present busyness, or lose ten pounds, or have kids, or get rid of the kids, or get a job, or retire, or get married, or get a divorce, or until Friday night.

Vicki Baum describes this absurd way of thinking: “The real thing is always going on somewhere else. When you’re young, you think it will come later. Later on, you think it was earlier. When you’re here, you think it’s there. But when you get there, you find that life has doubled back and is quietly waiting here. Here in the very place that you ran away from. Tomorrow is not somewhere else; the future does not lie in wait. The thing to be already is.”

When we think about people “wasting their lives” we usually think about people that made a terrible mistake in

judgment, but far more people waste their lives with a lack of passion than with misguided passion.

We need to decide how we are going to spend this one odd and precious life. Whether we are going to spend it trying to look good, creating the illusion that we have power over people and circumstances, or whether we are going to taste it, enjoy it and find out the truth about who God wants us to be.

The worst mistake is to surrender our lives to the inertia of mediocrity, to live without a sense of the Spirit.

St. Paul lived as a Pharisee carefully following the law and being suspicious of anything as ethereal as spirit. But then the Spirit surprised Paul by showing him how to live with joy. Paul writes to the church to encourage them to be open to the way God brings life.

Listen to this paraphrase of Romans 8: “Those who think they can do it on their own end up obsessed with measuring their own morality but never get around to living with hope. Those who trust God find that God’s Spirit is in them—living and breathing God! Obsession with self is a dead end. Attention to God leads us out into the open, into a spacious, free life. When God lives and breathes in us, God delivers us from the dead life.”

Romans 8 sounds like a commentary on Ezekiel 37. The dry bones to whom the prophet proclaims hope—that’s us: “God says, I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live. I will put my Spirit within you.”

You who gave up hope, who gave up dreaming—who have settled for a routine of work, bills and laundry. You who think your best years are behind you. You who have almost forgotten that God is not through with you. The Holy Spirit will breathe life back into you and push you beyond the humdrum.

When the routine threatens to make us ignore the Spirit, we need to allow God to lead us into the open, spacious, and free life. We need to give the Spirit room by backing up enough to gain perspective.

Harry Golden writes, “Why I never bawl out a waitress”: “I have a rule against registering complaints in a restaurant; because I know that there are at least four billion suns in the Milky Way—which is only one galaxy. Many of these suns are thousands of times larger than our own, and vast millions of them have whole planetary systems, including literally billions of satellites, and all of this revolves at the rate of about a million miles an hour, like a huge oval pinwheel.

Our own sun and its planets, which include the earth, are on the edge of this wheel. This is only our own small corner of the universe, so why don’t these billions of revolving and rotating suns and planets collide? The answer is, the space is so unbelievably vast that if we reduced the suns and the planets in correct mathematical proportion with relation to the distances between them, each sun would be a speck of dust, two, three, and four thousand miles away from its nearest neighbor. And, mind you, this is only the Milky Way—our own small corner—our own galaxy.

How many galaxies are there? *Billions*. Billions of galaxies spaced at about one *million* light-years apart and one light-year is about six *trillion* miles. Within the range of our biggest telescopes there are at least one hundred million separate galaxies such as our own Milky Way, and that’s not all, by any means.

Scientists have found that the further you go out into space, the thicker the galaxies become, and there are billions of billions as yet uncovered to the scientist’s camera and the astrophysicist’s calculations.

When you think of all this, it’s silly to worry about whether the waitress brought you string beans instead of lima beans.”

The Spirit helps us see that God’s love is bigger than the small concerns that push us away from life. Almost everything that seems hugely irritating is infinitesimally small. We cannot make ourselves see that, but we can allow God to show us what

matters, to breathe joy into our souls and bring our dry bones back to life.

The Spirit shows us that life is too short to harbor hurt feelings from unintentional acts. Life is too short to envy those who achieve what we do not. Life is too short to achieve wealth at the cost of impoverishing our spirit. Life is too short to repeat the mistakes of the past. Life is too short to give up hope when there are still possibilities. Life is too short not to live with God's love.

The Spirit helps us recognize that the ordinary is extraordinary. The Spirit helps us do good without selfish motives. The Spirit helps us become less interested in judging people—including ourselves. The Spirit helps us talk less and listen more. The Spirit helps us act with kindness that no one knows about. The Spirit helps us turn off the television and reclaim thirty minutes of life. The Spirit helps us try something different.

Whenever we live with energy, sparkle, delight, that's God's Spirit. God is here, breathing life into each one of us.

Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger

75 Hicks Street
Brooklyn, NY 11201
718.624.4743
www.plymouthchurch.org

