

SWEET, SWEET SPIRIT

1 Corinthians 12:4-11
Matthew 4:12-23

David B. Keller
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TEXT: Matthew 4:19-20 [Jesus] said to them, "Follow me, and I make you fish for people."
Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

PURPOSE: To invite us to be caught up in the generous gifting of the Spirit which moves us to give ourselves for the cause of Christ.

There's a sweet Spirit in this place. It's a spirit that has blessed the ties that bind us with our oldest members, through social events we host at Havenwood, and lots of personal connections through which our older members share their spirit with the rest of us.

It's a spirit that has drawn children into the friendship circle of Jesus, as they discover through creative learning and through our genuine affection for them that the Christian way of life is full of joy, and love, and concern for others.

It's a spirit that evokes the best kinds of fun. The people who participated in last weekend's Leadership Getaway laughed more and relaxed more than we thought we could. Our youth group has a great time just being together. Our bell choir and our chancel choir come together not just to rehearse, but to enjoy each other's company, and support each other in times of distress.

It's a spirit that moves us to risk ourselves for the sake of the least of Christ's brothers and sisters. Every night, dedicated volunteers open not just our building, but our hearts, to people who have lost everything, perhaps most dreadfully, their own sense of self-worth. Every week, we share food with dozens of families, who are not just recipients of charity, but who are friends our food pantry volunteers know by name. Behind the scenes, the spirit moves people to generous giving which makes it possible for us to offer assistance to people facing daunting crises.

It's a spirit that has grown a relationship with a remarkable community of Christians in Zimbabwe, and through that relationship, is teaching us the awesome power of faith in hard times, of gratitude under difficult circumstances, and of love that overcomes barriers of distance and culture and personality.

The song says, "There's a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place, and I know that it's

the Spirit of the Lord. There are sweet expressions on each face, and I know they feel the presence of the Lord.” I know, with a knowledge deeper than human knowing, that the good things that abound in this congregation are the consequence of the Holy Spirit’s presence and power. Here’s how I know: the way we are with each other, the way we care about each other, the difference that caring makes, and the active concern we sustain for all who need the love of Jesus, is more than human desire and effort could produce. If living into our vision of what this congregation is to be was not fueled by a power greater than our power, we would have exhausted ourselves a few years ago. This way of being church – this remarkable converging of tradition and daring, this way of meeting needs that makes us vulnerable to the pain of the world, this weekly challenge to bring our best to our ministries of worship, and education, and fellowship, and care, and outreach, and administration, runs the risk of wearing out those who give themselves to this work. We do get tired, and frustrated, and even resentful at times. We falter in our confidence that our efforts are actually bearing fruit. Our caring sometimes falls short of the need, and we get hung up on our feelings of inadequacy. If it were all up to us, it would have been predictable for us to say, let’s find an easier way to be church. Believe me, if it were all up to us, I would have been driving the bandwagon that was playing that music.

But we keep being caught up in the vision. We keep dusting ourselves off and pressing on toward something that is beyond our managing. And I submit that this is true about us only because the sweet Spirit in this place is none other than the Spirit of the Lord. We are fools for Christ. We are out on a limb as a church, stretching ourselves beyond our own resources, not because we are impetuous, but because Jesus asked us to follow him out to where he has taken us.

Here’s the thing we must keep in mind about the Spirit of the Lord. Its purpose is not to make us feel good. Its purpose is to build a church which is the Body of Christ alive in the world, to create a community of people who literally share his life, his love, his self-giving, and whose life together anticipates his coming kingdom. St. Paul said that “to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (1 Corinthians 12:7) What this means is that the gifts of the Spirit that you and I receive are not for you or me individually, but for us, us being the whole body of Christ in the world. The Lord pours out the Spirit on a church in order to equip that church for its part in the soul-saving, kingdom-coming work that Jesus perfectly accomplished in his living and dying and triumphing over death.

Look at what happened to those fishermen who were the first people Jesus called to follow him. The story doesn't describe them as being overtaken by the Spirit, but surely something deeper than reason or common sense moved them to abandon their familiar life and follow Jesus into an unknown new life. The Spirit did not give them tools to be better fishermen, or better sons, or better husbands, or even better believers in God. The Spirit drew them into God's great plan for saving the world. The Spirit's blessing was not for their personal benefit, but for the cause of Christ.

So the sweet Spirit is not mere sweetness. Scripture knows that the Spirit both comforts and disturbs. It connects us with God, but that connection opens the way for us to hear the call to follow.

Today we are launching our 2008 Stewardship Campaign, which, if you haven't figured this out already, is titled "Sweet, Sweet Spirit." At the level of the stated goals for this campaign, it is about raising the money we need to support the ministries of this church. You got just a small slice of this in the "Master's Card" skit today. There's no getting around it: being the church we are, doing the things we do as a church, costs money. In fact, it costs a lot of money. Sure enough, the benefits of our ministry are truly priceless. Those benefits bless us, and our children, and people in our wider community, but their real pricelessness comes from the fact that our ministry shares the life and the love of Jesus in the world.

Practically speaking, we are unquestionably at a moment of truth with regard to the way we are church, and the church we will be in the future. We've been in transition for the past five years, transition from being a church with an awesome history but an uncertain future to being a church that is revived in the power of the Spirit and the love of Jesus. Financially, our transition has benefitted from the prudent use of some large bequests to pay for new staff and new programs. This year, we will have spent the portion of those bequests that we allocated for underwriting our renewal. Which means that money needs to come from somewhere else. The best place it could come from is our significantly increased generosity. I believe that we will rise to the challenge and give with such joy that we will know once again that it is not because of what we bring, but by how the Spirit moves, that we are able to faithfully respond to Christ's call to be the church he needs us to be.

But I want to urge us over the course of this campaign to attend to matters that

run deeper than dollars. I want to urge us, over the course of this campaign, to more fully open ourselves to the presence and power of the sweet Spirit. The second verse of our campaign's theme song puts it this way: "There are blessings you cannot receive till you know that Spirit's fullness and believe; you're the one to profit when you say, 'I am going to stay with Jesus all the way.'"

That last line disagrees slightly with the message I am offering you today. I'm saying that most profoundly, it is the cause of Christ which profits when we choose to follow Jesus. But I know it is true that when we decide to follow Jesus, when we give ourselves to the great cause for which he gave himself, we do personally profit. We experience peace that the world not only can't give, it can't understand. We get caught up in the divine purpose that yields courage, and hope, and energy beyond our imagining. We enter into a belonging that runs far deeper than a simple "joining", a belonging that is akin to the way our body parts belong to our body.

There are blessings we not only can't receive, but that we can't even suspect are available to us, until we realize the fullness of the Spirit's way in the world, and come to trust its guidance for our own lives. Those blessings are awesome. They transform the way we face life's challenges. They liberate us from our own sins and shortcomings. They create a new heart in us. They connect us in love and hope with the whole human family. They free us from anxiety with regard to our own needs and fears and establish trust that God is unquestionably for us, come what may.

But, and here is the intersection between the Spirit and stewardship: life so blessed inevitably blesses. The sweet Spirit comes not to make us feel good, but to engage us in the cause of Christ, which calls us to give. In fact, the way we acknowledge that we have received the Spirit's blessing, the way that we demonstrate our trust in God's love for us, is by the way we give.

Of course that giving is not limited to giving to and through the church. Of course that giving is fundamentally about living a life which God designed us to live, which is realized in giving rather than in getting. But in this campaign month, it is right and proper for us to focus on that portion of our response to the Spirit's blessing which flows through our life together in Christ's church, and the ministries we share in his name. May it be, as each of us, individuals and households, bring our pledge of support forward and light a candle, that the Spirit lets us see how our giving here

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contributes to the increasing brightness of the light of Christ shining heavenly blessings on God's beloved world.