

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World*

All Souls' Requiem/November 5, 2017 at 5 p.m.

The Reverend E. Clifford Cutler

This morning I spoke of the saints; and tonight, I will talk of the Spirit that is like swift water. You will remember the quote from Wendell Berry. The Holy Spirit is like (he writes): "swift water over stones, rubbing them together, grinding off their edges, making them fit together, fit to be together, in the only way that fragments can be rejoined." The Spirit is like water, streams of energy that we cannot always see but which we feel flooding through us, pulling us forward. From the fulness of this Spirit, that is like swift water, John's gospel teaches, "we have all received, grace upon grace" (John 1: 16). Moses struck a rock in the wilderness from which water flowed. The Prophet Ezekiel envisioned a time when water would flow from the Temple bringing beauty and healing to all. Jesus stood up in Jerusalem at the Festival of Booths and announced, he was "living water." "If anyone thirst," Jesus said – for healing, for well-being, for righteousness – "let them come and drink." The Spirit of Christ is like swift, clear water. At the end of the Book of Revelation we see the river of the water of life, on each side of which is the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. This is the water of life, the healing Spirit of Christ, which flows over and around the faithful.

To be honest we don't know where this water of the Spirit is taking us. Jesus using another image, likened the Spirit to wind. "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes" (John 3: 8). The Trappist monk Thomas Merton was just as confused as the rest of us. This was his prayer.

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

“But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

“And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood Merton’s dilemma. The swift water of the Spirit sets on a bold venture of faith. We cannot know all the turns in the river ahead. We may not even know how sea-worthy we are! But Bonhoeffer concludes that the Spirit, as we swiftly move with its current, “promises forgiveness and consolation to the person who becomes a sinner in that venture.”

The Spirit tests us. The Wisdom of Solomon says, “God tested them and found them worthy of himself.” In fact, Jesus taught us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation.” And then if we are tested beyond our ability, we pray, then “deliver us from evil.” Paul tells the Corinthians, “No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it” (10: 13). The Israelites in the wilderness were provided with bread from heaven. But each person was only permitted to get what they needed for that day, not to greedily take more. The Spirit tested them to see whether they would follow that instruction.

Despite this testing, despite our hesitance, or our worry that we might not be up to it, the Spirit calls us forward. And just when we thought there is no way, the Spirit gives us gifts. They are gifts in that they are bestowed not owed. They are received by grace, in varying proportions. The Spirit gives us just what we need. Paul tells the Romans, “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver in generosity; the leader in diligence; the compassionate in cheerfulness” (12: 6-8). Paul gives a different list to the church in Corinth. But whatever the gifts, Paul said they are for the common good. They are to benefit the whole communion of saints. We talk of giving as relational abundance. When we all give in relationship with one another there will be an abundance. If we don’t

give, there won't be. We can't keep the gifts for ourselves as though they were private, otherwise they will wither and become useless. When we share our gifts then they really come alive!

It is this gift-giving Spirit that strengthens us and carries us into God's embrace. Again, Wisdom says, "the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God." We might say, using Trinitarian language, that the Spirit draws us into the love between the Father and the Son. We know we are in the embrace of a love in which we are included, not excluded, never excluded. In this presence of God, the mortal body puts on a love that is stronger than death. Death is swallowed up in love, and we are able to say with Paul, "Where, O death, is your victory?" All our loved ones (and their loss may have been an overwhelming test for us) are with God in all God's love.

You know, this is where I think I am after the killing of more than twenty people in the First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs, Texas. Their loss is an overwhelming test. How could it happen in a place of prayer? It leaves me speechless. We pray with Jesus, "Deliver us from evil." Then we listen to the Wisdom of Solomon that their souls are in the hand of God. They are embraced in God's love in which death is swallowed up and eternal life is found.

The Gospel of John says that when we hear the word of the Spirit we live. When I have heard a word of God it has most often been a quiet, spiritual experience, often an insight. I know a person or two who have had auditory experiences, but for me it has been mostly an inward understanding, and I have learned to trust that. To be under the Spirit's influence does not mean that we have an inside track to God, but that we have given God an inside track to us. There are times in fact when we cannot form the words to pray; and this may be one of them. Then Paul says, the "Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." I suspect that when in death our souls are before God we will hear those deep sighs of love and understand that we are accepted, that we are held in God's loving embrace. That is what it is to have life.

So, the Spirit is like swift water over stones smoothing us. We may not know where it is taking us. The Spirit tests us and because of that is also the giver of gifts. At the end we discover that the Spirit has carried us into a loving embrace. The Spirit is that still, small voice in which we hear a deep and victorious love.

*Amen.*