

**Sermon “The Work of the Church # 3 of 4 – Living a Holy Life and the Work of the Spirit ”  
January 25, 2009 Rev. Thomas L. Hall Salem United Church of Christ, Denver, CO Lectionary**

**We continue our understanding of what the church has offered in different traditions in order to help us balance our spiritual lives. Recall that we are focusing on five different ways that we, as individuals and we, as a church, can exemplify our lives. Last week, we considered the prayerful life that we participate in, as individuals and as a church. The week before we learned that the Bible we have proclaims The Word, the Spirit of God, and secondly, it is done through the living Word, which is Christ, and thirdly, the Proclaimed word as seen through us.**

**Today we consider two more: our personal moral lives and the work of the Holy Spirit, in terms of the church, they the Holiness tradition, and the Charismatic tradition. These are seen in churches that focus on “living a righteous life” like the Southern Baptists, and those churches and individuals focus on the gifts of the Spirit, as seen in the Pentecostal churches.**

**First: the Charismatic Tradition. There is probably nothing more confusing than the concept of the trinity and the place and role of the Holy Spirit. This isn't a time to glean the theology or understanding of the Trinity. Instead, let me say that for me, it is the Spirit, the "Ruah", God's Spirit that was given to us in the creation story. Jesus speaks a great deal about the Holy Spirit, giving the Holy Spirit to the disciples which will be an advocate, a teacher-which will lead us to discern those spiritual gifts that we have.**

**For me it is God's Spirit, that, when we allow it, wakens us to the presence of the Holy, the Divine. When we respond to that movement in our lives, be it in nature as we are mesmerized by a beautiful sunrise or sunset, or by the birth of a child, or in some other way that awakens us to a deeper awareness and connection to the force, movement, power, of life, we are in touch with God.**

**God wants to be active in our lives, to give us special gifts, like healing, teaching, visiting , hospitality, working for peace and justice, compassion, prayer, friendship. Each church, each person has special gifts. Regrettably not all churches or people are aware of them, or hesitate to use or develop them. The church is to welcome the different gifts and help others discern the gifts they have and to employ them in the work of God, which is here and among us now.**

**So, let me be practical for a moment here: some may ask, how do I get this? Simple: you have to ask for it, and ask for it in prayer. Then, you have to practice the discipline of waiting. When we pray for the Holy Spirit to come into our lives, into our church, we are not praying for an answer; we are asking God to enter us, to fill us with God's presence.**

**So, how will I know if I have received the gift of the Holy Spirit? This was a question I asked of myself when I first was learning “centering prayer.” What would be the fruits of spending time with God? The fruits of the Holy Sprit are spelled out in Galatians 5: 22 with nine characteristics: peace, joy, love, generosity, faithfulness, patience, self-control, compassion and gentleness. But more than that, one will, as one experiences in spending time with God in prayer, a sense of calm, a sense of unity with God , a motivation to act, a compassion for others, a desire for peace and justice.**

**Be aware that the Holy Spirit will shape the way one thinks and acts.**

**And that leads us to the other tradition, the HOLINESS OR MORAL TRADITION. when we hear these words, we might have some negative, knee jerk action. It can bring images of certain traditions which focus on an exclusive and narrow definition of how one is to live one's life. In short, images of certain people pointing fingers is conjured up.**

There are enough “moralists” in our society, groups who love pointing the finger and condemning. Jesus experienced that with the Pharisees who loved to point out to Jesus that he wasn’t obeying the laws of Judaism. Jesus in return spoke to them as being hypocrites and looking at the letter of the law and not the spirit of the law.

I get upset when our society focuses on the 10 Commandments and lift them up to the high and lofty rules that are to be followed. I’m going to make a confession to you here: I don’t follow the 10 Commandments. I can’t repeat them all to you, in the precise order. There are 3 that pertain to God and the other seven pertain to relationships with people. But I don’t follow them. I didn’t say that I don’t believe in them. I do. I try to follow what Jesus said when asked, what is the greatest commandment. He said, “To love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might, and the second is like unto it, to love your neighbor as yourself.” That is what I follow, and it doesn’t take up as much space on a tablet either, or in a courtroom.

The 10 Commandments are there not to make us feel guilty, but given to the Hebrews, to us, to have life. Jesus came so that we might have life too. The commandments for the Hebrews and for us, is a call to the blessed life, to a life of holiness, of shalom. God desires that we be whole, that we recognize that we are God’s beloved.

Holiness is not merely obeying certain rules. That’s how it was in Jesus day. The religious then, as well, as today, consider holiness as obeying certain rules. For the Pharisees, it was a way of separating the clean from the unclean. Washing your hands properly, not performing any work on the Sabbath, not eating certain foods, avoid certain kinds of people, especially tax collectors, harlots, non Jews. That was the way to holiness. Jesus openly defied this definition, shattering the outward rituals in favor of inward purity. He turned attention away from the ritual purity and pointed to the purity of the heart.

The commandments to Jesus are the natural outgrowth of a life that is welded to God, a life that is devoted to God, a life that is reflective of the love of God and the love that God has for us,. If we are in love with God, we obey God’s law because our experience with God has shown us that it is the best course of action.

At the heart of the moralistic, Holiness tradition is not keeping of the laws, but trusting in God and obedience to God.

Since God desires that we awaken ourselves to the Spirit, the Divine in us, we need to find ways to enter in this way of life. As I keep saying, it isn’t merely the outward obeying of certain rules or ritual that makes a person holy. All of us know of people who are so narrow minded, opinionated, and think that it is necessary for them to defend God and that God needs them to save God. What I’m encouraging is that we engage in a discipline or exercise that will help us to be holy.

Let me give you an illustration: if I tell myself simply to stop saying negative things, I will likely fail. If I tell myself, that I have to stop being negative, I will likely be unsuccessful. But If I begin with the “inside” by praying and asking for a heart that is pure, gentle, even for the gift of the Holy Spirit and those marks of the gift of the Spirit, and then commit myself to watch my words, thoughts and attitude, I have opened the door to the Spirit, to God to begin interacting with me. When I am about to say something negative, the Spirit can speak a word of caution to me and I can make the change.

The end result is not “Wow, aren’t I special because I stopped saying negative things” which sounds much like the Pharisees, but rather, “God is beginning to mold and shape my life.” The difference working from the inside out is extremely important to remember.

**So, am I saying that sin is not a factor in our lives? Am I removing “sin” if I don’t follow the 10 Commandments? NO.**

**Unfortunately, sin has been associated with obedience to a set of laws. Break one, and become a sinner. At the outset, it is important to understand that God cares about sin. Why? Because whenever we ignore or reject God’s commands, disastrous results follow. God cares about our behavior.**

**Most of us probably understand sin in the simple definition of breaking the 10 Commandments. But recently, in the class at the Academy of Spiritual Direction, a new way of understanding sin was provided by Glenda Hope, who founded the San Francisco Network Ministries in 1972 to reach out to young adults not attending church and to minister among the poor people in San Fran’s Tenderloin district. She is involved in many social change movements and working for peace, justice, women’s issues and dignity for all in San Francisco.**

**In her lecture she shared that we have been so accustomed to that traditional definition of sin offered by St. Augustine, defined by Moral Majority, and pious religious people. Sin has so long been seen as “rebellion against God.”**

**She offered an understanding of sin as being a violation against the wellness, the well-being of any person, of creation. Anything that fractures the trust, and causes unnecessary violence against creation is sin.**

**For me, sin, is that which causes disruption, removes connection, violates the well-being of any person. This means attitudes, words that demean, ridicule, or in some way, lessens the Spirit of the Living God in a person, or in creation, is sin. We’ll look more deeply at this in our consideration of the tradition of working for peace and justice.**

**A person or a church who desires to grow deeper in communion with God doesn’t start new programs, but seeks through prayer to discern God’s Spirit.**

**Practice these two things in the coming week: pray for the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and read Galatians 5: 22 about the gifts. And ask in meditation, in prayer for ways of working wholeness and examine yourself to see if there are words, actions, attitudes you may have that cause sin, violence against yourself and creation.**

**The traditions of the church have included teaching people to live a moral life, encouraging people on their journey to live a life full of integrity with the foundation based in God, to experience wholeness for who they are, and to live their lives with integrity. The gifts of the Spirit are different for each person because God calls each of us differently to the place where we are God’s beloved. Thanks be to God.**

## **Prayers of the People**

**Holy God, awesome creator, forgiver, and always present, we have come here this day searching for you because we believe that you are searching for us. In countless ways you reach out to us, tugged at our hearts, courted us, spoken to us. We confess that sometimes we have search for you in all the wrong places.**

**We admit that sometimes we have thought that we found you whom we when we only found cheap substitutes for your love. We worship the God of being right. Desperate to belong somewhere, we claim allegiance in tribes of our own makes—tribes of doctrine, of politics, of social location. When quarrels reach your ears, and even as we stammer out our excuses, we know it is not your way. Your way is excellent. Your way is relationship, discipleship, neighborliness, servanthood. Your ways transcends the dim truths we might fashion.**

**Show us this day how to drop the nets, filled with our meager catch, which we clutch to ourselves. You have a better identity in mind for us. Make us into your fishers of people. And allow us to be caught by you. Find us this day, Lord Jesus. Discover us anew so that we might find you, and in finding, love you, and in loving you, serve you in all that we do.**

**We praise you for the opportunity to welcome into our wider family, Christopher and Helen. Bless them on their journey with you.**

**In our church, widen our vision of what makes community. Allow us to leave our nets of our social groups to welcome and teach, to pray, to experience the gifts of the Holy Spirit in our midst, so that we might live our lives full of integrity and hope.**

**We pray for those who are hurting, who feel lost, who need your presence and strength.**

**We pray for our service people away from home and family. We pray for peace as well and particularly for an understanding of the things that make for peace. And we pray that the elections in Iraq will bring forth a way for the people to assume responsibility without our military presence there. The factions in Iraq continue to cause havoc, murder and mayhem. Provide a way for the elected government there to draft their constitution and become self responsible.**

**Bless our children, teachers, parents, grandparents, and heal in your way those who are sick.**

**Now, God, we come to listen with the ears of our hearts, and to see with the eyes of our soul**