

Pentecost People: Known by the Love of the Spirit

A Sermon Preached for Calvary Baptist Church

Psalm 33:13-22, Galatians 5:16-26

Sunday, September 16

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

*“Five hundred, twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes.
Five hundred, twenty-five thousand moments so dear.
Five hundred, twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes.
How do you measure, measure a year?*

*In daylights? In sunsets? In midnights? In cups of coffee?
In inches, in miles, in laughter, in strife?
In five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes,
How do you measure, a year in a life?”*

So, how do you measure a life, as the hit Broadway musical *Rent* asks us to consider? And more specifically, as we have been asking ourselves over the past few weeks at Calvary, how do you measure a life of following the Spirit? What does it even look like?

“How about love?” the song asks.

As we discovered the first week of this series, we can trust in the power of the spirit to help us do things we could never imagine doing on our own. And we can experience the unity of the spirit, as Mandy McMichael shared the second week. A kind of unity that brings a diverse group people together who would otherwise have nothing in common. And then, like we talked about last week, we can be people who live with the courage and boldness of the spirit – people who can’t help but sharing about what God is doing in their midst.

But even if we trust in the power of the spirit, even if we experience the unity of the spirit, and even if we live with the boldness of the spirit, all of this means nothing if you and I aren’t known by the love of the Spirit. Then, we are nothing more than “a noisy gong or a clanging symbol,” as 1 Corinthians 13 tells us. I love the way Eugene Peterson translates this famous “love passage” in *The Message*:

“If I speak with human eloquence...but don’t love, I’m nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God’s Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, “Jump,” and it jumps, but I don’t love, I’m nothing. If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don’t love, I’ve gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I’m bankrupt without love.”

Friends, a life of the Spirit is bankrupt without love. Love may be the focus of the very last sermon of this series, but I think it’s at the very top of the list of what it means for us to be

Pentecost People. It's also at the top of another list we find in Scripture – in today's text in Galatians 5.

If we live by the flesh, the writer says, our lives will be characterized by the works of the flesh – by human things. But if we live by the Spirit, our lives will be characterized by the works of the Spirit - by holy things: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

I don't know about you, but I was always taught that love was just one of the fruits of the Spirit. But notice that the word "fruit" here is singular, not plural. Many scholars interpret it to mean that the fruit of the Spirit IS love, and that everything else in the list that follows is meant to be descriptive of love. New Testament scholar Charles Cousar says, "Love is not one characteristic of the Christian life which can be numbered alongside many others; it is inherent in what it means to be led by the Spirit."¹

One of the comments I've heard throughout this series is that sometimes, we're hesitant to talk about the Spirit, because by its very nature, it can seem so subjective. For instance, what do we do when one person says that the Spirit is leading them to do one thing, and for someone else, the same Spirit might lead them to disagree, or even to do the opposite? What about when the Spirit leads one person to interpret Scripture in a way that is completely contradictory to what another person says the Spirit is leading them to believe? How can the same Spirit lead us to do such different things? And to believe in such different ways?

I must admit that even as we come to the end of this worship series, I still have more questions than answers about the Spirit and how it works in our world and in our lives. The Spirit is mysterious, and just when you think you have it figured out, it surprises you again. But what I do understand from today's text, I believe, helps us take an important step toward understanding the work of the Spirit, and that is this: wherever the Spirit is involved, a spirit of love is going to be so very evident. Because the fruit of the Spirit is love.

Charles Cousar says, "There may be no foolproof method of documenting the Spirit's presence in human life, but we can follow [the Spirit's] tracks by seeing evidences of love. [Therefore], if one's so called "Spirit-led" activity ends in needless enmity, strife, jealousy, and dissension, then it is a safe bet that the Spirit has had nothing to do with it."²

The sad reality of our world today is that Christians as a whole are not always known by the love of the Spirit. We're just not. In fact, I googled the question, "What are Christians known for?" and the very first link said this: "Today's Christians are more known by what they are against than for."

¹ *Galatians: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Charles Cousar.

² Ibid.

Can you imagine what might happen if the Church were really known for having a Spirit of love? If people flocked to church because here they experienced a spirit of belonging and welcome and a love like no other – love that they don't encounter in any other space in their lives? Think about how that might change Calvary? How that might change our community? How that might change our world?

Remember earlier this year when the world was mesmerized at Rev. Michael Currey's homily at the Royal Wedding of Megan Markle and Prince Harry? I think part of what was so captivating and inspiring and refreshing about that moment was that Currey was calling all of us back to the power of love.

An article in *The Washington Post* noted that his wedding sermon followed a week that included a school shooting in Santa Fe that claimed 10 lives and the killing of more than 60 Palestinian protesters the day of the opening of the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem, not to mention the hateful rhetoric that has become such a normal way of life in today's political climate³ – and yet in the midst of all of this, he challenged the world to imagine a love so powerful that it can completely change the world. In his 13 minute sermon, he mentioned the word "love" 60 times. But I think especially meaningful for us today is the ending of Currey's sermon, when he said this:

He said, "French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was arguably one of the great minds and spirits of the 20th century...[and] in some of his writings, from his scientific background as well as his theological one, he said that the discovery, or invention, or harnessing of fire was one of the great scientific and technological discoveries in all of human history.

Fire, to a great extent, made human civilization possible. Fire made it possible to cook food and to provide sanitary ways of eating, which reduced the spread of disease in its time. Fire made it possible to heat warm environments and thereby made human migration around the world a possibility, even into colder climates.

There was no Bronze Age without fire, no Iron Age without fire, no Industrial Revolution without fire. The advances of science and technology are greatly dependent on the human ability and capacity to take fire and use it for human good.

Anybody get here in a car today? An automobile?" he said. "Nod your heads if you did – I know there were some carriages. But for those of us who came in cars, fire – controlled, harnessed fire – made that possible. I know that the Bible says, and I believe it, that Jesus walked on the water. But I have to tell you, I did not walk across the Atlantic Ocean to get here. Controlled fire in that plane makes it possible.

³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2018/05/20/royal-wedding-sermon-on-love-was-about-more-than-the-marriage-of-harry-and-meghan/?utm_term=.53774061b4ac

Fire makes it possible for us to text and tweet and email and Instagram and Facebook and socially be dysfunctional with each other. Fire makes all of that possible, and de Chardin said fire was one of the greatest discoveries in all of human history. And he then went on to say that if humanity ever harnesses the energy of love, it will be like the second time in history that we have discovered fire.

Dr. King was right, he said. We must discover love – the redemptive power of love. And when we do that, we will make of this old world, a new world.”

Perhaps it's no coincidence that the very first Pentecost People are suddenly covered by tongues of fire when the Spirit comes, as we read about in Acts 2. And like those first Pentecost people, if you and I begin to harness the energy of the Spirit, we too, will begin to discover the firey, life-changing, redemptive power of God's love – a love that has the power to change the world from the very beginning. After all, it's because God so loved the world that Jesus came – that we may have life. And even at the very end of our lives, love is the only thing that lasts, isn't it?

“For love is strong as death,” Song of Solomon says. “Its passion fierce as the grave. It burns like a blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love, rivers cannot sweep it away.”

The most powerful sign of the Spirit's presence and work among us, is love.

“Five weeks ago, Brody Allen's parents were told that their two-year-old son's rare form of brain cancer meant that he has 2 months to live,” said an article published just yesterday in *The New York Times*. The boy's family realized that he probably wouldn't be here to enjoy one more Christmas. So they decided to celebrate early, putting up a tree and decorations at their house outside of Cincinnati, Ohio.

But then, the most incredible, and I believe Spirit-led thing happened. Their entire neighborhood began to decorate for Christmas, too.

Brody's health has deteriorated so that he no longer has the energy of a toddler or the use of his left arm and left leg. He likes to be outside, so he often sits in a red wagon, a blanket thrown over him and a hoodie pulled over his head, while his siblings pull him around their neighborhood outside of Cincinnati.

There he can see an inflatable Minnie and Mickey Mouse, a snowman, Santa Claus and a Christmas tree on the yard of Barbara Elliott, a neighbor whose home is one of six in the Allens' cul-de-sac that has been decorated for Brody.

Ryan Simpson, 34, who said he is known as “the Christmas guy” in the community [for all of his Christmas decorations] appeared at the Allens' door with a plastic tote filled with lights and decorations, and helped the family decorate inside and out. Mr. Simpson went back to the

house to add more decorations four days in a row. He helped neighbors decorate their houses, too. “When Brody saw it, he couldn’t believe it,” Mr. Simpson said. “He has been very animated [ever since].”

“Our next-door neighbor, who only speaks Spanish, took down all her fall stuff and put up snowflakes and poinsettias, and did garland on her fence and lights,” Brody’s mom said. “We [even] got 25 Christmas cards [in the mail] yesterday.”

And the community is now planning a Christmas parade for Brody. The parade is scheduled for Sept. 23 and will feature Santa Claus in a fire truck, Christmas carolers, and all of Brody’s favorite superheroes. “Brody has good days and bad days,” the article said, “but with these efforts, he has a lot of good moments.”⁴

What does the work of the Spirit look like in our world today? It looks like that.

You see, in the end, our lives are not measured by the number of emails we sent or responded to, as important as they may seem right now. It’s not about the grades we got in school or whether we made the winning shot at the game. It’s not about how popular we are, how many Facebook friends or Instagram followers we have, or if we had a date to the prom. It won’t be our job title or degree or the letters behind our name that will matter. It won’t be about how much money we made, or if we made any money at all. It’s not about any of these things. And I know we know that, but sometimes I think we spend our time and our energy as if we don’t.

Ultimately, you and I are given one thousand, four hundred and forty minutes in a day. Ten thousand, eighty minutes in a week. And five hundred, twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes in a year. And at the end of the years of our life, however long or not long it may be, love is the only thing that remains.

And so may we be people who are brave enough to harness the energy of God’s love, a love that just might light a spark, or a fire, or even a neighborhood full of Christmas lights, that can change the world.

How does that happen? Well, “it’s the Spirit of God, honey. It makes a little voice big, a shy person brave, and takes an ordinary dim, little life and makes it a bright life for the world.”⁵

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/15/us/boy-dying-brain-cancer-brody-allen.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

⁵ Marion Williams, NPR Interview