

In the Holy Spirit: Butterflies Are Free

From the series: I Do Believe

Scripture: Exodus 34:29-35, II Corinthians 3:1-4:2

Text: II Corinthians 3:17

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Butterflies are free. I do believe in the Holy Spirit, and I believe that the Spirit is the Spirit of God, the Spirit of freedom. For Pentecost 1996, for Christ Community Church, the butterfly is an appropriate symbol. It's an ancient symbol in the Church for the resurrection because of the transformation, the metamorphosis that it goes through from the caterpillar, the cocoon, to the butterfly - this magnificent little creature that goes aloft and catches the wind beneath its wings. As I thought of Pentecost 1996, Christ Community and a whole new world before us, I thought of the butterfly, a symbol of resurrection, the butterfly that soars with the wind beneath its wings, linking Easter and Pentecost and launching us into the future with great faith, unafraid.

We celebrate Pentecost as one of the historical festival days of the Church and, if you only had Luke, you would think that this thing just unwound, progressed rather naturally and smoothly. There was Israel and there was Jesus. Death, Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost, Christian mission, world mission - all of it very smooth, just moving along according to the plan and purpose of God. Wrong! For one thing, if we had only John's Gospel, we'd celebrate Easter and Ascension and Pentecost all on the same day. That's all John knows. He speaks about it all in one package. But, Luke began to see that the early return of Jesus just wasn't very early. Nothing was happening, as we have noted recently. That Messiah who was crucified and raised and brought into the presence of God did not return, and Luke began to see a historical perspective. So, in his Gospel and in the Book of Acts, he gives us the story of Jesus, his death and his resurrection, and the Gospel ends with Jesus being taken out of their sight. The Book of Acts begins with Jesus moving into the clouds, and in Acts, Chapter 2, the day of Pentecost. Well, the day of Pentecost was a feast day, a Jewish feast day fifty days after Passover, fifty days, then, after our Easter. If we just take Luke's scheme, it looks like it developed very naturally. The time of progression during that 40-day period, Jesus verifying his resurrection, his living reality, leaving their midst, and then the power of the Holy Spirit. That's Luke's nice, smooth, historical scheme.

But, it wasn't that easy, folks. First thing, note that the feast of Pentecost and the ecstatic experience of those first followers of Jesus was a holy Jewish event. It was about the God of Israel; it was the Spirit of the God of Israel - these were Jewish followers of Jesus gathered on a Jewish festival day. Their ecstatic explosion of power was totally within the context of the Jewish people.

Jesus never intended to found a world religion. The Christian Church was not in the purview of Jesus. It was a call to Israel to be faithful to the God of Israel and to renew itself according to the call of Jesus, but not a new movement, so to speak, but rather, a renewal of that old movement. However, it soon became a conflict situation. Initially there was great growth among Jewish people. There was a Jewish Jesus Movement. However, when Jesus didn't come back, there were Jews who were scratching their heads and saying, "You know, I wonder whether we should leave all of our great traditions."

Then in 70 A.D. the Temple is destroyed and now there is the Jewish Jesus Movement and there is the Rabbinic Jewish Movement - which movement will emerge as the ongoing, continuing Jewish identity? Well, we know from John's Gospel that the Rabbinic Jewish Movement came into the ascendancy, so that to say that Jesus was the Messiah was to be put out of the synagogue. And since Jesus hadn't returned and, at the threat of being put out, many said, "Maybe we'd better stay with what is familiar and what is our spiritual home."

But there was another factor operative. There was a Jew named Paul who had a vision of the resurrected Christ and a sense of being called to bring the Gospel to the nations, to the Gentiles. And Paul was powerfully persuasive and very successful. One of the ironies of this whole development was that it was the very success of Paul and the Gentile mission that dried up the movement of Jews to Jesus, because, if the Jews had joined the Pauline church, they would have lost their distinctive Jewishness. The threat in the 20th century, Jewish people tell us, is assimilation through intermarriage. But there was an earlier threat in the first century. If the Jews had followed the Jesus Movement according to the Pauline conception, there would be no distinctive Judaism today, and would not our world be diminished without that rich ingredient of the Jewish people? But, Paul was successful and, therefore, there was a conflict situation in that early Church.

You've got to remember our Gospels were all written after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. Our Gospels arose in a conflict situation. They were pleading with Jews to follow Jesus; they were presenting Jesus as the Messiah, the answer, the Promised One, and they were showing Jesus was the Messiah from citing the old scriptures, the Hebrew Scriptures. But, there was Paul out among the nations, the Gentiles, and he was gaining a great many converts. And now you have a situation where there are Jews who follow Jesus but want to remain distinctively Jews. For example, James, the brother of Jesus - he was the leader of the Jerusalem Church, and there are those who think that Luke wrote the Book of Acts in order to play down the tension between James and Paul. Whoever said

the Christian Church was kind of a sunny, sweet, sentimental, sickly, kind, loving bunch? It never has been. There has been conflict and tension, and it was sharp between Paul and James. James was a Jew, an observant Jew. James followed Jesus, believed he was the Messiah, and James believed that that message should be taken to the whole world. But he wanted the whole world to be like he was - an observant Jew following Jesus.

Paul, too, was an observant Jew. But, Paul had another idea. Paul did not want to exclude Israel from the grace of God. There are all kinds of statements in Paul's writings that indicate that it never entered his mind that God was done with Israel. Paul didn't want to exclude Israel, but Paul wanted to include the Gentiles, the nations. And he felt that it was his calling to bring the story of Jesus to the nations. And in so doing, he had to decide - what do I do in Thessalonica or Corinth or Ephesus or Rome when somebody says, "I believe Jesus is the Messiah. I would like to become a member of the movement; I'd like to be baptized." What does Paul do? Does he say to him, "Believe. Be baptized. The grace of God embraces you"?

Or, does he say, "Believe. Be baptized. Be circumcised. Follow the food laws, the whole Mosaic Law; be an observant Jew"?

Now, that's not exaggerating the situation, folks. Don't you see it? That's what James would have said. He would have gone throughout all of the world telling the story of Jesus, inviting all of the world to come to join the Jesus movement, but James would have expected that the Gentile become a part of the whole Jewish religious way.

Paul - and this is Paul's radicality (a lot of things I don't like about Paul, but I like this about Paul) - Paul could see that the Jewish religious system, its ceremonies, its rituals, its code of laws, its Torah, its way of life, he could see all of that as both being from God and not being absolutely necessary. He could see all of that as being provisional for a time, but he could also see that that was a human container and that the Spirit of God could create new containers. And so, the radicality of Paul, the brilliance of Paul was that Paul understood that God could embrace people beyond Israel as they were without putting them into the religious structures that had become Israel's way.

That was a brilliant insight. It caused conflict. It put him at odds with James. He got into arguments in every congregation he founded. In the reading from Corinthians, for example, he is defending his ministry. He said, "I don't need letters of recommendation. You, my people, are my letter of recommendation." (You see, he took a lesson from me; or maybe I learned that from him, I don't know. Probably so.) He said, "Look, Corinth, people transformed by grace, people with gifts of the Spirit, this lively, vital, charismatic community - I don't need a letter of recommendation. You are my letter of recommendation. Because you are a letter of Christ written by the Spirit on the fleshly table of the heart. Something new has happened."

And then he realizes that there are those who are shaking their head, "No. No, this is not sufficient. These Gentile believers of Jesus are not yet adequate. They are not yet full-fledged people of God; they are not yet Jews, observant."

So, he said, "Look, you remember when Moses went up on the mountain and got the Law, the Ten Commandments, and he came down and his face was all aglow? He put a veil over his face so that people wouldn't see the glory fade away."

Now, it doesn't say that in Exodus. All it says is he put a veil over his face in order that people might not be afraid of that shine, that glow. But, probably somewhere along the way there was a Jewish Rabbi scholar who made some comment about maybe Moses put his veil over his face so they wouldn't see when the face didn't shine as much - that doesn't matter. It's pretty clear what's operating here. Paul says Moses got the Law from God, the only God there is. He got the Law, the true Law; he got the true Word. He came down from that mountain and his face was shining because he had been in the presence of God who is Light. Then he says he put the veil over his face because that shine was only skin-deep and it started to fade, and Moses thought, "If they see the glory fade from my face, they'll think the glory is fading from the Law," so he put a veil over.

And then Paul says, "You know, that reminds me. That's exactly what's happening to my Jewish brothers and sisters today. They read their own scripture, they read Moses and it's like they got a veil over their face. They read it and they don't understand it. They read it and they don't believe it. They read it and they can't see it. Hardened hearts, dull minds, veil over their face. Why don't they read it? Why don't they see it? How can they be so dull? Moses was of God. Moses' light was of God. That truth was truth, indeed, but it was partial, it was a lesser splendor, it was a step on the way but it wasn't the absolute and the end of all."

Paul says, "Don't you see that with Jesus, God has done a new thing? With Jesus there is a brightness and a fullness and a splendor and a glory such as Moses never, ever conceived of! Don't you see that Moses got light from God, reflected in skin-deep glow, but we, beholding Jesus, not beholding Torah, we beholding Jesus are transformed into Jesus' likeness from one degree of glory into another? Don't you see that what we have in Jesus is so much more?"

Well, James said, "No. Not really."

James said, "Paul, if you have your way, there will no longer be a distinctive Jewish tradition. If you have your way, there will be no ongoing, distinctive, observant Jewish people. I agree with you about Jesus; I agree with you that God was in Jesus, all of that. But, I don't agree with you that it is enough simply to be graced by God through Jesus without all of Moses."

Paul said, "You're blind."

And James said, "You're radical."

Paul said, "What must I do?"

And James said, "You're out of here."

You see, who was right and who was wrong? Is it really an issue of right and wrong? Is it necessary that I say that Paul was right and therefore God was done with Israel and the Christian Church becomes the New Israel and supersedes Israel? You know what that kind of thinking leads to? That has led to the triumphalism of the Christian Church; it has led to anti-Semitism; it has led to the Holocaust; it has led to pride that has divided the world and has made the world a hostile place – that kind of spirit.

Why can't I just say, "Paul, you had a vision. Paul, through you the God of Israel was brought to the nations. Bless you, Paul! Paul, you could see that human religious structures, human religious rituals, humanly systematic formulated doctrines are necessary and important and useful, but provisional and temporary and never absolute."

Why can't I just say, "Paul, bless you for that freedom. Bless you for seeing that new times demand new human containers," without having to say to you somehow or other, "If you don't follow me, James, you're out. And James, James, could you bless Paul? Could you be content to say, 'I'm the guardian and the caretaker of a true and ancient and precious tradition. Bless you, Paul. Take its wonder and glory and truth, and if you insist, its greater glory, and bring it to the world. Because Paul, when you talk about Jesus, you're talking about the Jesus of the God of Israel. Paul, when you talk about the Spirit, you're talking about the Spirit of the God of Israel. Consequently, Paul, we are not competitors. We are in the same business, for God's sake!'"

Paul - thank God he saw the relative, provisional, historically conditioned, partial adequacy of every human structure, liturgy, doctrine, and he saw the Spirit of God as always out ahead, blowing where it will, shattering forms, creating new containers, and embracing an ever-greater circle of the children of God. The likes of us who, as he says a bit later in the fourth chapter, have seen the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus. But the likes of James who saw the glory of God in the Torah found his fulfillment in walking the way of Moses.

Well, I would have been on Paul's team. I think I like James better, but I would have been on Paul's team. Paul's kind of radical; revolutionary people are not always the kind you want to invite to dinner. It's a lot more comfortable with the caretakers and the guardians. But some people are called to probe the frontiers, to find the new containers and to praise God in ways not yet conceived of. Not a new God. Not a novel idea. Continuity with the old, but tradition as the instrument of continuity and change, because in our present human existence there is no absolute, no absolute certainty.

Dear friends, there's risk, but there's also wonder - the wonder of a freedom, the freedom of the Spirit of God. Paul says, where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. Butterflies are free. And so are we.