

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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Baptism by Water and Spirit

John the Baptist announced: *“Someone is coming soon who is far greater than I am – so much greater that I am not even worthy to be his slave. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!”* – Mark 1:1-11

Paul asked the believers in Ephesus: *“Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? Did you take God into your mind only, or did you also embrace him with your heart? Did he get inside you?”* – Acts 19:1-7

When I was a teenager, one of my best friends attended a Pentecostal church, to which he of course invited me. I went once because he was my friend and I had nothing better to do. I went back a second time because there were more girls at the Pentecostal church and they had bigger hair than the girls at the United Church. I went back a third time because it was bizarre in a compelling kind of way. Pentecostal worship was unpredictable, at least at first. There was an expectation that unusual things would happen. People would babble gibberish. Often people would cry; sometimes they would fall on the floor. It was a bit uncomfortable, out of my comfort zone, and therefore kind of exciting. I grew up in the United Church, where we are pretty reserved, maybe even a bit repressed. We worship mainly with our minds, and our bodies don't get much action – we don't dance and we don't fling our arms around much. So I found it fascinating to observe worship in which overt emotion and irrationality was celebrated to such a degree.

It took me a while to realize that what at first seemed unpredictable was fairly predictable. Given the expectation that people will talk gibberish or weep uncontrollably, people will fairly predictably talk gibberish or weep uncontrollably. It took me a while to realize that what my friend described as the workings of the Holy Spirit was the fairly predictable result of a certain kind of emotional manipulation, as much showmanship as anything else. It took me still longer to realize that, far from being a sign of being born again as a Christian, speaking in tongues, as they called it, or *glossolalia*, as it is called by scholars of

religion, is experienced by devotees of many religious traditions, from shamans in aboriginal cultures to the devotees at various Hindu shrines.

But for many people, my friend included, that hysterical display is what they think of when they hear passages like the one we read this morning – the disciples in Ephesus receiving the Holy Spirit – they think of an experience in which a person seems to be under the control of spiritual forces beyond our usual experience.

Since those days, I have met other Pentecostals, who have a much deeper understanding of the work of the Spirit, who view the Spirit at work in academic study, in action for social justice, in breaking down barriers of race, class, gender and sexual orientation. And I have come to realize that there are things that we can learn from the ways in which Pentecostals liberate themselves from the control of the calculating, rational mind in their unrestrained worship.

Which is why I like the paraphrase of the passage from Acts that we read this morning. A more conventional translation of that passage has Paul asking, “did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase, called *The Message*, expands that question in this way: “Did you take God into your mind only, or did you also embrace him with your heart? Did he get inside you?”

That paraphrase makes it clear that receiving the Holy Spirit involves a receptivity of both the heart and the mind, and that living in the Spirit is to serve God with all our hearts, soul, strength and mind. Today we talk about the heart as the emotional centre. But for the biblical writers, the heart symbolizes our whole self. And so to ask if we have taken God into our heart is to ask if we have really given him our whole selves.

Since my early experience with my Pentecostal friend, I have learned to see the work of the Spirit as much more of a personal openness to God’s leading and direction in our lives. The Bible is clear that the work of the Spirit is not primarily about some ecstatic experience, but about our using every faculty we possess, our intellect and moral imagination, our courage, creativity, and compassion, our empathy and our emotion, in the service of community. The Spirit connects us to

each other, it brings about justice, it breaks down barriers of race, tribe and economic status, and it connects us to the earth. To be baptized in the Spirit is to let that Spirit inside of us, so that we care about those things, and acts as God's agents of compassion, community and creation.

And that means that each of us needs to ask an important question: "did Jesus get inside you?" Christian faith, according to this passage, isn't about being respectable in a conventional sort of way. It isn't about showing up on Sundays, about doing what other people expect a good Christian to do. It is about a spiritual encounter that touches us at our core and reorients our whole being toward the love at the heart of the universe.

"Did Jesus get inside you? Did you take God into your mind only, or did you also embrace him with your heart?" The question can also be reversed: "Did you take God into your heart only, or do you also embrace him with your mind?" Have you really engaged your mind in God's service, or have you set your doubts and questions aside as not worth thinking too much about?

"Did Jesus get inside you? Did you receive the Holy Spirit?" Those are challenging questions. They ask us to consider if we are really serving God with our whole selves, or are we holding something back? Are we giving God our Sunday mornings, but not our weekday work? Are we offering our children, but holding back ourselves? Are we truly engaging everything we have and are in the service of the highest and best in life, or are we only engaging what we can offer without sacrificing our comfort, security and prosperity? "Did Jesus get inside you?"

So that is my question this week for all of you, and for each of you: "Have you received the Holy Spirit? Did you take God into your mind only, or did you also embrace him with your heart? Did he get inside of you? Is the Spirit renewing your spirit and working within you and through you on behalf of community, justice and creation?"