

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

Dr. Thomas P. Harp

March 9, 2008

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

When the Spirit Dwells in You

Romans 8:6-11

Consider this: the Holy Spirit has called you here today for a reason. Now I know that some of you come regularly, never miss unless there are extraordinary reasons. And I know that some of you are visiting friends or relatives and just came to church with them. And I'm pretty sure that some of you simply got up this morning and decided to go to church. We're glad you did. But beyond that, beyond those very real, human choices, consider that the Spirit of God moved in your life to bring you here today. In short, your coming to worship was not an accident, not a product of habit, not a coincidence, not even a stroke of luck. Your being here is nothing short of an act of God.

I know, we don't normally think that way. We're not used to thinking in terms of what the Spirit of God might be doing in our lives. Not used to seeing the Spirit of God at work in current events, personal choices, and so on. We're SO NOT used to that, that we can't quite imagine it when some crazy preacher suggests it. Nevertheless, I am inviting you to believe that God wants you to be here today. God has a vested interest in you and in your discipleship. And knowing God as we do, we may trust that God does not ordinarily leave things to chance. Thus when we speak of Jesus being the Good Shepherd, we must understand that the Good Shepherd leads his sheep into the fold. And if that's true, if Jesus the Good Shepherd herded you into worship today, your being here is nothing short of an act of God.

So why would God do that? Would God bring you here so you could listen to a marvelous sermon delivered by a great preacher? While I'm flattered by such a thought, I don't think that's the reason God has brought you here today. Maybe God brought you here so you could be moved by a great choir under the direction of a great choral director, accompanied by a great pianist? No, as wonderful as our musicians and our music programs are, that won't do it either. I suspect that God has brought us together today in order to change the way we think. God has drawn us here to speak to us in a way that we might not otherwise hear, and to care for us in such a way, as we might not otherwise be cared for. In short, God has not brought you here to be entertained by good preaching or wonderful music, but to change or renew your life.

You see, being a disciple of Christ is not easy. It never has been, but these days it seems to be even more challenging. We live in a time when we're encouraged not to think in terms of the Spirit doing something to us or being at work in our lives. And even if for a moment on Sunday morning we do think that way, the minute we step outside the door we're being encouraged to think in terms of what we're doing to help God. For example, have you heard that little refrain, "Your life is God's gift to you, what you do with your life is your gift to God?" Notice how much responsibility that puts on you? Notice too how it completely removes the Spirit from the way you live. Saying that what you do with your life is your gift to God fails completely to acknowledge that the Spirit of God might be in you and working through you to accomplish God's purposes. In other words, thinking that what we do with our lives is our gift to God is a worldly way of thinking, not a spiritual way of thinking, or to use Paul's wording, thinking that way is setting our minds on the flesh.

Trouble is, it is so easy for us to do that, so easy to slip into that wrong headed kind of thinking. It's all around us, even in the religious community. Remember the WWJD bracelets that were so

popular not too long ago. They were supposed to remind the wearer to ask, "What would Jesus do?" in a particular situation. As good a question as that is, it's a worldly question. The spiritual question is, "What is the Spirit of God prompting me to do in this situation?" Now I agree that WITSOGPMTD is not nearly as catchy as WWJD. And I certainly have no quarrel with those who want to do the right thing and wear those bracelets to help them remember to do that. But remembering to do the right thing is not being free in Christ as Paul claims. Trusting that God's spirit is working through us as we do the right thing is being truly free in Christ. Disciples of Jesus understand that the Spirit of God has brought them to that situation precisely in order that they can have an impact on it. In short, we're called to realize that God is doing something to us and through us as we live our lives daily.

I know! That's kind of heady stuff. But it really is very simple, and very freeing. God is on our side. No that does not mean everything we do is God's will. God is not on our side in the sense of making everything we do right. It means very simply that in all that we do as Christians, we are not alone. Indeed, we rarely know how God is working through us, but we can be confident of that assuming we are seeking to be Christ's disciples. I remember getting a phone call from a young man who had been in my youth group in Lima. It had been several years since I had seen him. He was in graduate school at the time he called me, as I recall. Seems he had been to church that morning and the pastor had said something in the sermon that reminded him of something I had said several years before. To be honest, I don't even know what it was I said or when I said it. But I do know this: God was at work in my ministry to that youth group. And several years later God was at work in the sermon of a minister I don't even know. And through the work of both of us, God call that young man to be a Presbyterian minister. Not, not because of something I said. Not, not because of something that other minister said. But because of something the Spirit of God said through us.

Look if Christ is in you, if the Spirit of God is in you, then you belong to Christ. You belong to him as a slave belongs to his master. That means you serve him, doing what he commands you to do. I know we don't like to think that way. We're keen on freedom, freedom of choice, freedom of opportunity. We want to believe we serve Jesus voluntarily. But if the Spirit is in you, can you really say no to that Spirit? Really? Again, I know that this is not the way we usually think about our relationship to God. But I suggest that we usually take way too much on ourselves with regard to that relationship. Look at Moses trying to wriggle out of his call to return to Egypt. How much choice did he have really? Consider Jeremiah complaining about his mother giving him birth, complaining to God that everybody curses him, yet continuing to be faithful. Do you think he did that on his strength alone? He did not. But, if the Spirit of God is in you, then you belong to God and you draw on that strength to do what God calls you to do.

What does it mean to be not in the flesh, but in the spirit? Obviously we are flesh and blood humans, but we don't have to think of ourselves only in that way. That is what the presence of the Spirit does for us. It frees us from thinking only as other people think. For example, what would you like this church to be known for? Would you prefer that people thought of us as that church with three steeples? Or would it be better if they thought of us as that church where the people really care about the poor? Is it better to be known as the church with a great music program, or the church that has changed this community for the better?

Well, I know what I think. The Spirit of Christ has drawn us here to challenge the way we usually think, to invite us to consider that when Christ's Spirit dwells in you, your life is changed, your priorities are changed, indeed your whole understanding has changed. To begin, you know you are not alone. In all that you do, Christ's Spirit is at work in you to bring new life, new life to people you meet, new life to the community where you live, indeed new life in you.