

Seeing the Holy Spirit

John 1:29-34
January 15, 2023

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

In his book titled “Can You Remember to Forget?” James W. Moore tells of a pastor who was serving as guest preacher one Sunday morning. He went to the church early to see what it was like and get the feel of things. “As he was walking down a long hallway ... he came upon a large room used as a nursery for preschoolers. Glancing in, he saw a little boy who looked about 4 years old, sitting all by himself. The little boy said, ‘Hi, my name’s Tommy, and I’m all alone in this big room.’” Drawing on his pastoral counseling skills, the preacher answered back, saying, “You feel all alone in that room?” “I don’t just feel it,” said the boy. “I know I am all alone!” “Trying to reassure the boy, the pastor said, ‘Don’t you worry now. I’m sure that before too long somebody will come to be with you.’ ... Little Tommy looked up at him and said, ‘Why not you?’”¹

Nobody wants to go through life alone. It’s natural to seek others to come alongside us. But in seeking the company of others, how do you know who’s a good person, who to trust? To some extent, like the little boy Tommy, we have to look them in the eye and decide.

In our New Testament lesson, John sees Jesus coming toward him and declares, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” Can you imagine it? John has dedicated his life to baptizing in the wilderness. A steady stream of men and women gather around him every day, but only one is singled out as special.

Jesus alone has been chosen to share the Holy Spirit with others. We see this where John says, “I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’” And from that moment on, Jesus becomes the truest, purest, most faithful embodiment of God the world has ever known. And because of Jesus, we have the joy of sharing in the Spirit of God with one another.

You can’t go wrong seeking the Spirit of God in life and sharing it with others. But just how can you tell who among all the people in this world shares in the Spirit of God? It’s kind of an important question. Coming alongside others is how we get things done. It’s how we learn to do what we do and to be who we are, to grow into the person God would have us be.

¹ As told by James W. Moore, *Can You Remember to Forget?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 69-70.

John knew this. John looked to Jesus as the one to follow, saying “After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me. John knew that Jesus was sent to lead all people back into relationship with God. “... I came baptizing with water...,” says John so “that he might be revealed....” And yet, so many people these days miss out on having Jesus in their lives. So many people get led astray by others they believe to be worth following, worth trusting, whether that’s among your friends, in your family, on social media or elsewhere in your life.

The question is, are we really aligning with the right people, looking at things from the right point of view. How do we know who will help us to live a better life, make better choices for ourselves and our families, bring more joy and peace to the world?

For John the Baptizer, it was a matter of looking for the Spirit of God within the person who stood before him. Countless people were baptized by John at the Jordan, but only one was worth following, only one who could be trusted above all else. Who are the people you put your trust in? Whose lead do you follow in making decision, forming opinions? Have you ever been led astray by someone?

As you look at the people in your life, ask yourself, “Do I see the Spirit of God reflected in their eyes? And do they see it in me.” Do they see you as someone of good nature, a godly person who can be trusted and whose lead they can follow?

John knew Jesus was the one to follow because God told him to be on the look out for someone special, the one on whom the Spirit descended and remained. And because of Jesus, that same Spirit is with us now, felt and known in the people upon whom God has sent the Holy Spirit, godly people who can be trusted, people who will come alongside us in our common desire for a better life for all.

It is only through Jesus that this is possible. When John proclaims Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” he points to Jesus as the one who makes it possible for us to live godly lives. Only Jesus is able to bridge the gap between God and humankind.

We know this from the imagery of a lamb taking away the sin of the world. Jesus as the Lamb of God does not so much point to the forgiveness of sins, but rather the reconciliation of God and God’s people, which includes forgiveness of sins. However, in the Jewish temple, lambs were not sacrificed in atonement for sin; it was a bull or sheep or goat that people sacrificed for the forgiveness of their sins.

When John talks about the Lamb of God he's talking about the Passover lamb. The Passover lamb celebrates Israel's deliverance from Egypt and liberation from slavery.

So really, John is not pointing to Jesus as a sacrifice for human sins -at least not here-but rather as a symbol of deliverance and liberation. In this sense, we can look to Jesus to deliver us from that which would lead us astray and liberate us from that which would hold us back.

This is how we know who to trust and follow – it's those people in our lives who reflect the nature of Jesus in who they are. And those who do not – those given over to anger and bullying and manipulation – they will only lead you astray, like a lost sheep wandering away from the flock of Jesus, straying from the guidance of the Lord.

So the next time you consider whether or not to follow someone else's lead, take a moment to look for the Spirit of God reflected in their eyes, flowing through their heart. If you truly see the Holy Spirit in someone, then you can trust that person to be a blessing in your life. That's someone who you can safely stand alongside in helping to make the world a better place for all. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

When we do not know which way to turn, O God, give us the wisdom to turn to you. We like all your children face the weight of earthly burdens. Some of us have troubling relationships with others, feeling the pain of broken hearts, broken friendships, broken commitments.

In this time of silence, grant us each the grace to honestly acknowledge the part we have played in this brokenness, and the brokenness of the world around us. Open our hearts to the power of the Holy Spirit as we listen for your voice in this moment of silence.

We offer our gratitude for your presence, most holy and loving God, through the soothing power of the Holy Spirit.

Having confronted our own responsibility, let us breathe in deeply of your forgiving love, and, with renewed faith in you, guide us to wholeness through the one who makes all things and all people new.

Send your spirit of renewal and wholeness upon those who need your healing touch this day. We continue to keep in prayer those grieving a loss. And for us, Lord, grant us the grace to allow the Holy Spirit to work within us, that by knowing us, others may know you. We pray this in your powerful name, as together we join in the prayer that you taught us, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.