

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE


SPIRIT AND FORMS - ENEMIES OR FRIENDS?

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SPIRIT AND FORMS - ENEMIES OR FRIENDS?

"I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, 'Write what you see in a book....'"
Rev. 1:10,11

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the 50th day after Easter. Along with the Festival of the Nativity and the Festival of the Resurrection, Pentecost forms the third major annual celebration associated with the life of Christ. Centuries ago the practice was initiated to wear white garments on Pentecost Sunday. Hence, the day is also known, especially in Anglican and Lutheran circles, as Whitsunday, and the season as Whitsuntide.

We ought to make more of Pentecost than we do, for what happened on that first day of Pentecost has abiding significance for Christians in every time and place.

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One question that Pentecost raises has to do with the relationship between spirit and forms. This is not an exclusively religious question. It insinuates itself into virtually every area of life; education, politics, art, music, to name but four. But for the church it is a persistently urgent question, one that must be answered over and over again. How do spirit and forms relate?

The tendency in human affairs is to see spirit and forms as enemies, or at least as opposites. There is little doubt in my mind that if people were asked which they prefer, spirit would win hands down. And why not? Spirit suggests vitality, spontaneity, creativity, exuberance, enthusiasm, excitement, motion, life, freedom. I've often felt lifted and relaxed by the Coke commercial on television in which a host of freshly scrubbed youngsters are seen on one of Italy's lovely hills singing, without any encumbrances,

"I'd like to teach the world to
sing in perfect harmony...."

And forms? Well, forms suggest order, sameness, predictability, ritual, routine, discipline, ceremony, standards, tradition, habit, restraint. I would go so far as to say that it is in the nature of things that spirit attracts and forms repel.

* * *

But spirit and forms are not enemies. They are not even opposites. They are complementary realities that suffer when separated from each other.

To establish the point I should like to cite the experience of the beloved John on the Isle of Patmos. Just who this John was we do not know for sure. But that hardly matters. What we do know is that one who bore that name gave us the finest piece of apocalyptic writing ever known to humankind. We call it the Book of Revelation. It is the book with which our New Testament canon closes.

Notice how the vision came: "I was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." John is telling us here that he was not on Patmos of his own volition. He was there as a punishment for fidelity to Christ. He had been banished. Exiled. The probability is that he was spared execution because of his advancing years.

Let's not romanticize Patmos. Let's not give it the Travel Agent treatment. Patmos was a small, scrubby, treeless island off the coast of Asia Minor, 60 miles southwest of Ephesus. It suffered from the inattention of Rome. It was a repository for the unwanted. Its Zip Code number was 00000 because Patmos stood on the edge of nowhere!

But Patmos is more than a physical location. Patmos is a state of mind. It stands for rejection. It is the place where we are forced to live when we

know ourselves to be rejected by man and think ourselves to have been rejected by God. Patmos is that place where we are overcome with feelings of expendability, uselessness and self pity.

Let Patmos represent those experiences in which we feel overpowered by circumstance; the times when we have tried to do the right and gotten into trouble for it; when we feel as though we are in a tag team match with the devil and his hosts; when we sense that we are on the shelf, put down, written off, cast out!

Patmos can be anywhere. It has no physical limits. There can be a Patmos on the island of Manhattan. There can be a Patmos in the wheatlands of Kansas or along the sun-drenched coast of Florida, or on some wind-swept promontory in Maine. Patmos can be a hospital bed. It can be a rocking chair in a nursing home. Patmos can be a lonely flat in some hi-rise tenement. Patmos can be a prison cell or a penthouse suite. In short, Patmos is anywhere that one feels used up and worthless, expendable and unneeded--after one has tried.

* * *

Given such a setting how do you explain John's masterpiece. Why did he not give us a lament or a dirge? Why did he become apocalyptic? Well, he was not only "on Patmos" he was also "in the Spirit." Listen to him: "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, 'Write what you see in a book....'" His outer address was Patmos but his existential address was "in the Spirit." That's where he lived. And Spirit conquers place every time!

What does it mean to be "in the Spirit?" You know what it means! We can't diagram this play. Such an experience lies beyond the refinements of logic and language. But we know when we are "in the Spirit" and when we are not. We are "in the Spirit" when we are in tune with God's creative and redeeming love. When

we are suffused with a sense of the Divine Presence. When we are open to the powers of the world unseen. It is an inner state stemming from an awareness that one is forgiven and forgiving, that one is cleansed, that one is open, that one is receptive to truth, that one is ready to obey.

There isn't much said nowadays about inner states. We are more concerned to alter outer circumstance. To a degree this is good. We would prefer to clean up Patmos than to talk of spiritual alignment with God. But if one is "in the Spirit" she can know the peace of heaven in hell!

Spirit conquers circumstance every time. So, Abraham builds an altar to God while the Canaanites are in the land. So, Isaiah sees God when Uzziah dies and the nation is plunged in grief. So, out of unlikely Nazareth Messiah is raised up. So, Paul in a Roman jail writes his epistle of joy. So, Martin Niemoller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer reach their loftiest perceptions of the gospel in dank German dungeons.

If one is "in the Spirit" he can find the living God in death row. If one is not "in the Spirit" the stones and signs and symbols of even St. Peter's in Rome would be to no avail.

When I am "in the Spirit" the Bible is alive. When I am "in the Spirit" worship engages my entire being. When I am "in the Spirit" my own frailties are clearer to my sight than my neighbor's faults. When I am "in the Spirit" preaching is a problem of too much rather than too little.

Environment and faith influence our earthly life, but not to the same degree. Faith is by far the stronger of the two. The fact that he was "on Patmos" was relatively insignificant. The telling description is that John was "in the Spirit," for the Spirit creates its own environment.

* * *

"But," you ask, "how did he manage to find himself 'in the Spirit?'" Now it's a bit dangerous and presumptuous for a minister or theologian to try to track down the trackless Holy Spirit. As the old hymn has it:

"His Spirit floweth free,
High surging where it will...." *

There is no classroom formula for it. But we have one telling clue. Listen: He was "on Patmos," "in the Spirit," "on the Lord's day." On the Lord's day! Here is where form enters the experience, for the Lord's Day is an institution. It had a long, rich, suggestive history. Originally, as given in the law in Exodus 20, the Sabbath was to be observed because God rested when He finished the work of creation. When the command was given again in Deuteronomy 5, man was to desist from his labors in order that his servants might be given rest. The early Christians honored both Saturday and Sunday for awhile. Eventually they settled on the Lord's day in happy recollection of the resurrection of their Lord from the dead.

Century after century, you see, faithful Jewish mothers and fathers had said to their children, "We don't do this today: It's the Sabbath." And many, I'm sure, as in our time, replied "Why do you impose form on our spirits? Why do you institutionalize us?" But some of my Jewish brethren insist that the maintenance of the Sabbath over the years has been, humanly speaking, the salvation of the Jew!!

In all likelihood there was no church on Patmos, not even a chapel. But the Lord's Day, once remembered, can be celebrated anywhere. When that day came John knew it. How he knew we cannot be sure. Maybe there was an old tree on which he marked off the days. Exiled prisoners do not have calendars. But he knew! When that day came his mind went back to his congregation, probably one in Ephesus. And all the strength and vitality and unity and fellowship that he had known returned to bless him.

I have often thought about you gathered here on

a Sunday when I've been on vacation--perhaps on a freighter somewhere in the Atlantic. Making the necessary allowances for differing time zones, I have imagined to the minute what was happening in the service, who was approaching the lectern to do what, and I have found myself strengthened by the remembrance of this blessed association.

In my mind John's experience happened on a Sunday night after a day of breaking rocks in the prison quarry. He dragged his weary body back to a miserable hut and remembered. Remembered that sixty miles away his brothers and sisters were breaking bread and sharing the cup.

Forms and institutions, structures and habits make possible the actions of the Spirit. They provide the framework in which the Spirit operates. Spirit and forms are not antithetical. They work together for our good.

It is form and structure and institution that save us between our times of inspiration. It is form that keeps us from an over-reliance on feeling. Sure he felt remorse. How would you feel? But he remembered not just his feelings but the fact that in that worship yonder God's covenant of love was being celebrated. He was a child of promise. God had done something in history. He could trust his life to that.

I'm amazed at Luther's confidence in form. If you would ever try to think of a major figure in Christian history who would be for spirit and not form, Luther would likely be the nominee. He had a positively turbulent conversion. It shook his whole being from inside out, not to mention shaking the whole continent of Europe and the church. But when Luther was asked in later life how he knew that he was a Christian, he would reply, "Because I have been baptized." He trusted the form to be sure that his feelings were not mistaken.

So Jesus to Nicodemus, "Truly, truly, I say to

you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (John 3:5) Spirit is the dynamic, water is the form, and both are necessary.

* * *

On Patmos, in the Spirit, on the Lord's day. Spirit and form need each other. You haven't outgrown the church. You haven't outgrown the hymnal, or the Prayer Book or the Commandments, or the Beatitudes, or the Lord's Prayer. Spirit and form need each other. Spirit uses form because we are bodies as well as souls. And form needs spirit because the letter kills and the spirit gives life.

Each age needs to be rescued from an over-emphasis in one direction or the other. As I see it, our age needs to recover a respect for forms. I detect this need in our suspicious attitude toward the founding documents of this republic. We are looking for new forms. Some people think that we have outgrown the Constitution. My judgment is that we do not so much need a new Constitution as a new spirit. The form is alright.

People tell us that we need a new church, that we need new worship, that we need new organization. Maybe what we need in the body of Christ is to be "in the Spirit." It could well be a sign of spiritual malnutrition, if not disobedience, when we keep tampering with form instead of submitting to Spirit!

Pentecost happened because there was form. They were all together in one place making prayer--and the Spirit came.

"I was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, 'Write what you see in a book....'"

I don't know what your Patmos is. I do know that this is the Lord's day, and that if you are "in the Spirit" something good could happen to you. Pray God it will.

CLOSING PRAYER

*Help us, dear God, to remember
who and whose we are.
Comfort and strengthen us
through Thy Holy Spirit,
And make us less a drain
on others and more a blessing.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Amen.

FOOTNOTE:

- * Lyon, Meyer, "The God of Abraham Praise," The Pilgrim Hymnal, No. 14, The Pilgrim Press, Boston, 1959

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