

“The Charismatics”
John 2:1-11; I Corinthians 12:1-11
The Reverend Joanna M. Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
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Key verse: Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord...I Corinthians 12:4-5

Do you ever wonder whether you have it? The Spirit, I mean. The Holy Spirit. The third person of the Trinity, who according to our faith tradition, has been lavishing Holy Spirit upon human spirit since the world began? In the book of Ezekiel, a pile of dry dusty bones is given new life by the Spirit of the Lord. The prophet Joel proclaims that God’s Spirit will be poured out on all flesh. On the Day of Pentecost, a sound like a violent wind rushes in to the house where the followers of the departed Jesus are gathered, and all of them are filled with the Holy Spirit. They begin to speak in other languages as the Spirit gives them utterance, and the people who are there from every nation of the world are able to understand what they say.

Do you have The Spirit?

Samuel Lloyd is Dean of Washington National Cathedral. He tells the story of the day his dignified grandmother, who was almost as wide as she was tall, lost one of her sons at the state fair. After a frantic search, she finally spotted him on the other side of a tall fence inside a pen with a very agitated bull looking at him. In the flash of an eye, she with all her girth, climbed the fence, grabbed her son, and pulled him out the nearest gate. Where did that kind of power come from? No one could figure out how she did it. It was almost as if there had been another person inside of her, energetic and passionately powerful, who was released at that very moment. She became capable of things that she had never imagined. That was the way it had been on the Day of Pentecost when ordinary people found themselves full of the Spirit and were able to do things they would never have dreamed of doing before. (1) It began with the charismatic speaking in tongues, but soon, those early followers of Jesus were doing all sorts of things as well. They were feeding the poor; they were teaching by word and deed; they were blessing the children;

they were binding up the broken-hearted; they were proclaiming the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (2) They had the Spirit.

Do you ever wonder if you have it? There is a sweet, funny little movie out called *Little Miss Sunshine*. The father of the screwy family in the movie is a good-hearted guy who is trying to get a book published about a motivational success program that he has created. He is having a hard time getting the book published, but he believes fervently in his mission. He says to his daughter, who is about to enter a children's beauty pageant, "There are two kinds of people in this world, Olive. There are the winners and there are the losers. I know you are a winner."

The leaders in the church in Corinth believed there were two kinds of people in the world: there were the people who had the Spirit, and the people who did not. The speaking in tongues crowd, the spiritual ones, acted as proud as peacocks because they possessed what they believed to be the most spectacular spiritual Pentecostal gift. They looked down their noses at the other mere mortals in the church who had not been similarly blessed. It was a mess. People were fighting. There were winners and there were losers, and the winners were acting ugly.

Paul wrote to the congregation trying to set them straight, once and for all. "Now concerning the spiritual gifts, sisters and brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. There are varieties of gifts and varieties of service but they all come from the same Lord. There are a variety of activities but it is the same Lord who activates them." And then this, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit, and it is given for the purpose of the common good." Paul goes on to enumerate the different ways the Spirit is manifest in people. Some are given the gift of wise utterances; some are able to speak in tongues, (though that is mentioned toward the end of the list), some, the working of miracles.

Faith itself, Paul says, is a spiritual gift. Now, if there is anyone here today who is concerned that you do not have enough faith or that you don't have ANY faith, or that you are losing what little faith you have – this is a good word: faith itself is a gift from God. You don't have to work on it; you actually cannot work on it. All you can do is receive it, and have the good grace to say thank you.

Gifts given by God, spiritual gifts, given – activated – and to be used to the glory of God and for the common good. What a radical idea in our individuality oriented culture! We are given spiritual gifts, including faith itself, not so that we can get to heaven but so that we can use what we have been given for the good of the whole. In our day, everyone seems to be out to do his or her personal best. We identify our career paths, and we set our goals and try to achieve them, but we must not forget that whatever God has blessed us with, God has given so that we can be stewards of those blessings and offer ourselves, our abilities both natural and developed, for that which is greater than we.

I don't know about you, but these days I can hardly watch the evening news. Night after night, there are stories of soldiers and their families and their sacrifices. I am deeply touched by the spirit of camaraderie that lies beneath the service of our troops in Iraq. How they watch out for one another! How they literally live and die for the others in their company in the face of attack.... "Use whatever you've got for the common good," Paul wrote.

I think of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the exceptional spiritual gifts he had and how he used them at great sacrifice to transform the soul of a nation and how he preached the same Gospel Paul had preached. "We are caught up in an inescapable web of mutuality," Dr. King said, "tied in a single garment of destiny. We must give our overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve that which is best in our individual society." Time and again, he used the spiritual gift of prophetic proclamation to speak of the human suffering and spiritual disillusionment that are the inevitable legacies of war. He called the world to harness its creative power for the purposes of making peace and making possible prosperity for all nations of the earth. (3) That is what an individual, a church, and a nation is being called to in this very day. "To each is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good."

One of the most delightful developments at Morningside in recent months has been the deepening involvement of our congregation in the community, in the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, and in the Presbyterian Church USA and its mission work around the world. To each is given gifts, but the gifts are given by God in order for us to serve one another. This is a message for our time if I ever heard one.

The other clear message is the glad reminder that God's Spirit is at work in and through every single one of us. There are a variety of gifts and a variety of ways to serve, and not one is any more pleasing to God than the other, because it is the same Lord who has activated every one of them.

I have perhaps shared with you before the oft-told true story about the woman who went in to a worship service one day in one of New York City's most prestigious Presbyterian churches. She was sitting down near the front. During the service something inspired her to stand up and say "Hallelujah!"

An usher rushed down the aisle, tapped her on the shoulder, and asked her, "Are you all right?" Then, he tried to get her up out of the pew and up the aisle.

She said, "I'm fine. I've just got the Spirit this morning!"

He replied, "Well, you certainly didn't get it here!"

We will save for another day the subject of whether Presbyterians can some times act as if we are God's "frozen chosen". Today, we celebrate the indiscriminate outpouring of the Spirit upon us all. Some of you are really smart about money, and you help us be good stewards of Morningside's financial resources. Others of you can take three roses and two sprays of baby's breath and create a floral masterpiece. Some of you can sing, and some can teach. Some can bake a great cake, and others can exegete the Greek New Testament. Some of you can tell a great story. Many of you can light up a room by your smile. Many of you can put others at ease simply by your quiet presence. One person, or two or three, know just the right button to turn on the sound system. Another has laughter that is contagious. In Greek, the word for gift is "charis" from which come our English words "charismatic" and "charisma". I am here to tell you that YOU are the charismatics of our time and place. YOU are the manifestations of, the containers of, the vessels of the Spirit of the Living God, who in every time and place gives and renews life. YOU are God's charismatic gift to the world.

In a moment, we will ordain a new class of elders. Those being ordained through the ancient ritual of the laying on of hands will participate in a

ritual that is thousands of years old, a ritual that makes visual and tactical the passing of the apostolic tradition and the passing of the mantel of leadership generation to generation. “When the Apostles in Jerusalem heard that in Samaria, people had accepted the Word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, and they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.” (3) It is a deeply moving thing to kneel down and to have the ceremony of the laying on of hands take place, but the ceremony does not mean that those who are being consecrated are any better or holier or more charismatically inclined than anyone else. We all have the power. We all have Samuel Lloyd’s grandmother’s power if we will just claim it, if we will discover within ourselves the energy and the passion that God has put there to represent Christ and to serve his great purposes. Whatever we do, in word or deed, we do, not to our own glory but in the name of our Lord, giving thanks to God, the giver of every good, perfect and useful gift. (4)

When our Lord turned the water into wine in Cana that day so long ago, he reminded us that he himself was filled with the extraordinary favor of God. To his disciples, he said, “I am giving my Spirit to you.” Because of God’s extravagant grace, poured out in Christ, we never have to worry whether we have enough of what it takes to do what needs to be done. How does Paul put it in Philippians? “And my God will fully supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” You can take that one to the bank.

I love what Barbara Brown Taylor writes about the saints of the church: “Just remember, you do not have to be famous, or perfect. You just have to be you, the one-of-a-kind, never- to- be- repeated human being God created you to be. And you don’t have to do it alone.” (5) There are all the others who will shine like the sun right alongside of you, as we bear witness together to him who is the light of the world.

Can I close with a memory of two of the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement? I once asked Andrew Young to preach from a pulpit that I served. He accepted. The bell choir played a beautiful piece just before Andrew Young stood up to speak. As he went into the pulpit, he said, “My text for the morning is ‘To whom much is given, from him, much will be required,’ the words of Jesus. My subject this morning is Hosea Williams.” (Hosea Williams had just died days before.)

“Hosea and I didn’t always get along,” Andrew Young said. “Hosea was a fire-brand. He was often hard for people to take. He had a temper, and he would speak out and act out and rub a lot of people the wrong way. I was out there trying to soothe the troubled waters, and Hosea was always churning up the waters. But he had reason.”

Ambassador Young went on to say that Hosea Williams was the son of blind African American parents. At the age of 13, he was almost lynched by a white crowd in South Georgia. He served in World War II in the Third Army in Europe. He was the only survivor from a thirteen-man platoon hit by mortar fire in France. He waited for hours for the medics and the ambulance to arrive. As the ambulance was taking him to the field hospital the ambulance itself was hit and everyone in the ambulance, including the medics, were killed. He spent 14 months in the hospital. When he got out, he caught the bus and went to his home town. When he got off the bus and walked into the bus station, he walked over to the only water fountain in the bus station to get a drink of water, and he was beaten so badly he had to be hospitalized for another two months. Hosea Williams had a story, and Andrew Young told it to that Presbyterian congregation. Then he turned to the members of the bell choir and said, “Some of you have a large bell to ring, and some of you have a small bell. Hosea’s bell was the bell of pain and he rang it, but the Civil Rights Movement would not have been complete without what he brought. Each of you has your own unique role to play, your own never-to-be-repeated contribution to make to the good of the whole.”

I look at you this morning, sisters and brothers, and in my mind’s eye, I see us all as members of God’s multi-talented bell choir. There is a cosmic melody; Dr. King spoke of the sweet music, the music of love that is calling each of us to act for the good of the church and for the good of the world. Let us not be uninformed about the spiritual gifts, but let us claim them and lift them up and use them, great and small, always and ever to the glory and honor of God. Amen.

(1) *Cathedral Age*, Fall, 2006.

(2) A Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

(3) Acts 8:14-15.

(4) *Book of Order*, PCUSA.

(5) *Home By Another Way*, p. 214.