

## DO YOU HAVE THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT?

Acts 19: 1-7; Mark 1: 4-11

In all the gospel accounts, Jesus comes out as Messiah when he is baptized by John. On this Epiphany Sunday, when Jesus begins to be 'epiphanied' or manifested publicly, we begin here too. John says that he baptizes with water. But there is one coming, he says, more powerful than me. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. So, what's the difference?

OK, let's start with John. John calls people to repent, to confess their sins, and then he baptizes them as a public sign of an inward movement. What is this inward movement called repentance about exactly? Well, repentance involves coming to terms with things in your life you become aware of that are wrong, things that need to change, things that you are prepared to take responsibility to change. Repentance means you claim agency for yourself, that you are capable and able to change. You repent of the ways you mistreat or neglect people around you, the ways you make excuses for yourself while being quick to judge and condemn others with little mercy or effort to understand them. You repent of the ways you cop out of things and hide behind your anger, your depression, your helplessness, your procrastination, your lack of faith and hope, your betrayal of love, your pettiness and dismissiveness. When you repent, it means you are ready to face the music and begin to sing and dance to the tune of love. It's no longer about tomorrow or someday. Repentance is about today, about now. 'I'm ready, John. Please baptize me.'

Wow, but isn't repentance hard? Isn't it all a set up for an even bigger fall, a deeper failure, a greater defeat? How much is real change actually possible for us? Are we really capable of it all, or are some of us weighed down by larger demons that we cannot overcome all by ourselves? Will self-doubt bring us down in the end? How long can we keep up the way of love without messing up? When will we start deceiving ourselves again because we don't want to admit we're failing and falling again? When will we start to let ourselves off the hook again, accepting mediocrity as our destiny?

This is where John stirs the waters. He gets people hyped and ready for change. He challenges them to build up their spiritual muscles, their resolve, their faith and hope in what's possible, their passion for transformation... But

John is also acknowledging that this can never be enough in and of itself. He is pointing the way to something greater, something more powerful. He calls it the Holy Spirit. And, like good biblical story telling, this Holy Spirit he's pointing to, invisible to the naked eye, and inaudible to the human ear, becomes visible as a dove coming 'down' from heaven, so to speak, and alighting on Jesus, and a voice is heard from this other dimension called heaven: "you are my child, the Beloved One." Wow!

John is not only passing the baton to Jesus; he is declaring that Jesus has in him something to give to people far greater than a resolve to repentance. Jesus can actually bestow the power of transformation, a power beyond human capability and ability alone. It's not just about power but empowerment. It's not just about a little change here and there, but transformation. And even as there will be setbacks, failures and defeats along the way, something qualitatively different begins to happen when the Holy Spirit works in a person. There is a new energy that will not leave you alone. If you veer off the path it will torment you as conscience and conviction and it will keep hounding you until you keep opening your heart again and again to the ongoing call of love. You can't fake it anymore. It's got to be real and authentic now. You're not pretending to listen to somebody. You really listen. You don't pretend to feel compassion for them. You really do. You don't just pretend you're letting go what someone else has done to you that's hurtful. You name it, engage the situation and the person, and then work to let go whatever feelings of bitterness, hate or revenge you've got in you. That's hard work. That's why the Holy Spirit is so necessary. It's the power of love to change the flow, the current, the passion or lack of passion in you.

OK, preacher, now you've made us feel really bad. If we're honest with ourselves, how can we not feel like failures? I mean we pretend all too often, and we pretend because being honest with others would be unkind. I mean, how many times can we hear the same story, the same woes and not pretend? How often can we absorb the negativity of another person without becoming negative ourselves? How much can we put up with the pretense? Besides, there are times we're just off. Sometimes we just can't be there for others. Sometimes we're engrossed with ourselves, our needs, our wants. Sometimes, we feel our grudges deeply and we want to stay angry at others. Does that all mean the Holy Spirit is not in us?

Actually, the problem may be the way we are encultured to be in our society. Modern society has taught us two ways of dealing with change, two ways we

breathe in from the time we're born. First, we are taught that it's all up to us. We are individuals and we need to be in control. We are free and we can do whatever we want. We can make ourselves whatever we want to be. We hear this in speeches at every high school graduation and many a Disney movie: You can be and do anything, so long as you believe in yourself. You've got it in you.

Now all this isn't bad. It's what John the Baptist was challenging in people. Become the people you dream of being. Change can happen and the fate of our whole nation can be transformed if each one of us rises up. But John was no solitary individualist. He also believed in the necessity of a higher power. You need the Holy Spirit. I'm only tilling the soil. I can't grow the seed. You need the sun and rain of the Holy Spirit. Try saying that at a high school graduation. You can't do anything you want just because you believe in yourself. You need a whole world of love and support, and you need something invisible, something external to activate what is in you, you don't even know is in you. And it's not about accomplishments and achievements that will make you successful, victorious, famous or a lot of money. No. It's about inner transformation through a greater love. You need Holy Spirit.

OK, so if one obstacle in our path to real change and growth is our individualism of faith in ourselves alone, needing to be in control, what's the other? Well the other is the exact opposite: In our society we swing from an "it's all up to me what I do with my life and who I become if I believe" to "we can't really change who we are." In a recent Toronto Star article, millennial columnist Jen Kirsch, writes: "People tell me I can be too sensitive, but I think it's just because I'm passionate... but I can also be careless, although this contradiction is a definite Gemini trait... Mostly this duality manifests as my free spirit; I'm open to anything, likely because I was the 'baby' of the family, the youngest of three siblings, so I always had someone looking out for me but am also prone to going rogue..." "Ever notice," she goes on to say, "how easy it is to use labels to excuse, rather than explain behaviour? Though these labels act as convenient theories to align with our personal narrative and justify our less savoury traits, we should be examining them, pushing ourselves to do better. I've been leaning into my astrological sign – and a handful of other excuses – as a way to make sense of my identity. Sadly, I've been doing it for years."

Now Kirsch is writing about herself, but she also sees herself as part of a larger reality in our society. From needing coffee first thing in the morning in

order to be civil with others, to other reasons we treat others without civility, decency, consideration or compassion, we make excuses for ourselves and let ourselves off the hook all too easily. Whether we use personality tests like Myers-Briggs or others to help us locate our personality type and how we relate best in situations or relationships, often this is also used as an excuse or crutch, undermining a larger call to do better and be better human beings whatever the situation or relationship. We worry about our self-esteem if we are judged too harshly and we resist more traditional spirituality which uses the language of sin and moral depravity. According to Kirsch, one of the best things that happened to her was a friend calling her out on what she was doing as making excuses for poor behaviour and copping out of taking responsibility for her moral growth past her self-absorbed individualism.

And isn't this so true of our times? We swing on the one side with the illusion that we can be and do anything we want or dream if we believe in ourselves. And even as the support and encouragement of others and a combination of genetics and other factors beyond anything we could ever control or engineer are necessary for most any accomplishment, we function with a deluded individualism of me, me, me. But once failure, setback or criticism come our way, we make excuses, fall to pieces or hide behind the falsity of conviction that this is the way we're made. Our moral flaws are just part of our personality and part of who we are, not part of what needs to change. 'Please don't crush my self-esteem!'

But love is not a personality trait. It is the most essential quality of our inner being, whoever we are. And love is so infinitely rich and expansive that we can express it and live it however unique our personality traits. We are called to love and to find our richest identity through our loving whatever our personality type.

The challenge with love, though, is that we cannot just make ourselves love. We cannot master loving or control it. We need to be inspired, empowered and transformed by it before we have something meaningful and impactful to share with others. We will also fail love as much as we succeed in living and growing it. This is why the journey of repentance must be lifelong. As Martin Luther the Protestant reformer declared in number one of his ninety-five theses: repentance is not just an act of penance, but a life-long journey. We always need a John the Baptist in our life. That's why the rhythm of worship always begins with confession. But then, this sets us up for Jesus and the Holy Spirit, this higher power that actually empowers us by infusing us with a

passion and desire to love and to find our richest life fulfillment and purpose in our loving and caring. It also empowers us not only to advocate for justice and truth, but to let go grievances, because otherwise, they will eat into us and the first thing they consume is whatever love is in us to share.

And so, to sum up: we need John the Baptist, we need the call to repentance, we need confession, we need to be challenged and called to change, to growth and ultimately, to a transformation that is a life-long journey. But we also need the Holy Spirit. We need that greater power, energy and force to work in us, to set us on the right path, to revive us when we fail and fall, to wake us up when we have gone to sleep for too long, to ground us when our anxieties and fears throw us off in different directions or torment us into self-doubt and loathing. We need the Holy Spirit working in us drawing us in with others through community, through mutual support, through constant recognition that we cannot go it alone if we are to make lasting progress.

As we begin our journey through Epiphany into Lent and Holy Week culminating on Easter Sunday, may we experience the call to inner growth and transformation afresh, and may we begin to feel afresh the flow of the Holy Spirit in and through us... Come, Holy Spirit, Come... Amen.