

“The Bible: The Gift of the Spirit”
Luke 4:18-19

Two Bible passages that have been speaking to me this week are the following:

1. Isaiah 55:8-9: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.
2. 2 Corinthians 12:9: “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.”

In both scriptures, we are given the reminder that our popular wisdom about power and life doesn't always serve us well. To love as God loves and to follow God's way, we have to allow God to help us through a higher source of power than our own ego power. To live with a sense of grace and peace in a world that is governed by retribution, violence, fear, and control, we cannot rely on the same source of power that the world uses.

This is the message which the Gospel of Luke was trying to convey for us. We need the power of the Spirit to live by the vision of God in this world. The Gospel of Luke is the first part of the story which the author was trying to share about faith. It is the part about the power of the Spirit in and through Jesus. The second part, the book of Acts, is about that same power or gift of the Spirit moving the disciples to fulfill their calling.

The ministry of Jesus according to Luke began in a very ordinary place where Jesus would have gone many times before. Yet, what was extraordinary about that moment of the beginning of his mission was his choice of scripture for that day and how he proclaimed that it was being fulfilled through him.

Jesus had been in the wilderness prior to beginning his ministry. He had to get grounded in the world of the Spirit before going into his ministry. He faced the temptations of ego power of control, esteem, survival, and security. When he went back, he allowed the Spirit to be the driving force of his life's energy. He started teaching and preaching in different towns and synagogues. When he came to his own town, he went to the synagogue to speak. He picked up a reading from the book of Isaiah that was about the fulfillment of God's vision of justice and peace for the world. It was a lofty vision that it seemed impossible for anyone to accomplish no matter how powerful they were. The people of Jesus believed that only one who is blessed by God could help bring such vision to life. And Jesus knew that. That is why he was always centered on the power of the Spirit within him. That was the path he set before his disciples.

The gift of the Spirit as one of the great themes of New Testament is so central to the ministry of Jesus, to his disciples, and to us. It is not something we can fully understand with our minds, but it is the only power strong enough to help us love and live beyond the limitations of our fears, failures, losses, and hatreds. Most of the time, the power of the Spirit leaves us with tremendous gifts we never imagined possible. Here are a couple of examples. I recently received a note from a friend who experienced deep loss through the passing of her husband to eternal life. She wrote, “Honestly, I would never have thought I'd be able to say that losing

my love could be a beautiful experience, but it was.” Through the power of the Spirit, the times they shared as he was facing death, were so Spirit-filled, that they knew the power of God’s love. They experienced the eternal love of God in a way that was beyond anything our rational minds could tackle. Even though the loss and grief were very real, the power of the Spirit propelled them into a new realm of love and connection.

In his book *Death Is but a Dream*, Buffalo Hospice doctor, Christopher Kerr tells the story of one of the people under his care who found healing at the end of his life through a dream or as we may call it, the power of the Spirit. John was a decorated war veteran who was struggling with persistent insomnia. He “had been diagnosed with end-stage heart failure, but that was not what kept him up at night...John had participated in the battle that General Eisenhower had named the Great Crusade of World War II, the Battle of Normandy...John’s family explained that although he had never so much as mentioned his war experiences until the previous few weeks, he was now unable to close his eyes without reliving the unimaginable carnage of D-Day. He had recurring nightmares, from which he woke up drenched in sweat...John was only twenty when he enrolled as a gunner on the SS James L. Ackerson, which entered Normandy beside the USS Texas. He was and would always remain a proud Texan who took his duty as a soldier to heart and believed in the ideals of his country. On June 7, 1944, he was part of the infantry division that was sent ashore to Omaha, the bloodiest of the D-Day beaches. Their assignment was to retrieve the soldiers who had been isolated from the rest of the forces ashore. The mission was successful and the landing craft came back with the wounded Rangers they had been sent to rescue. Still, John would never be able to wipe away the vision of the bloodied beach strewn with the mutilated bodies and floating limbs he saw upon landing...As he lay dying in hospice, John was assailed by nightmares about the fallen American soldiers he could not save...watching John return to that site of terror a second time as an old man defied words...He could not overcome his pain, and his dreams reflected it. That is why the complete transformation he underwent a few days later was all the more remarkable...” He was finally able to sleep. “He credited two of his more recent dreams for his welcome development. In a first joyful dream, he had relived the day he had finally gotten his discharge papers from the military. His second dream sounded more like a nightmare, but to him it was anything but. He dreamt he was approached by a soldier who had been killed on Omaha Beach and had come back to tell him: ‘Soon, they are going to come and get you.’ John instinctively knew that ‘they’ referred to his fellow soldiers, and that the dream was about reuniting with his comrades, not being judged...The soul of that courageous twenty-year-old boy who had fought the ghosts of war for sixty-seven years was finally released from its injustice and from his sense of enormous obligation.” This is an incredible story of healing through the gift of the Spirit which comes to us in many different ways, including our dreams. When we are able to finally let that power of the Spirit work in and through us, we are able to more freely join the mission of Christ of transforming the world.

Our world is filled with experiences and threats that block our ability to live by the Spirit and to allow God to heal our pain so that we may heal others. But when we consent to God’s gift, amazing things happen. This does not mean that we never suffer again or that everything would be perfect for us. What it means instead is that we are able to live with the strength of Spirit that lets us love and embrace God’s justice and mercy beyond any of the limitations of our egos. There is tremendous freedom there!

We will end with another practice of Lectio Divina using this scripture: 2 Corinthians 12:9: "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." Amen.