

**“How Can We Understand the
Role of the Holy Spirit in Our Lives?”
Acts 2:1-21
Galatians 5:22**

During the past several months I invited you to suggest scripture passages or themes upon which you'd like to hear a sermon. One of you asked me to address the question, “How can we understand the role of the Holy Spirit in our Lives?” Though the Holy Spirit is not a topic to be confined to Pentecost, today is a most appropriate time to seek an answer to that question.

We can discover an answer in part by turning to the Letter to the Ephesians: **“Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”**ⁱ

That power within and among us is the Holy Spirit. We typically regard the Holy Spirit as a powerful force. It has to be. **“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while [the spirit] of God swept over the face of the waters.”**ⁱⁱ It must have taken raw power to bring the world into existence. And so we often turn to one of Isaac Watts' hymns: *I sing the mighty power of God That made the mountains rise; That spread the flowing seas abroad And built the lofty skies.”*

It was with **“great power and a mighty hand”**ⁱⁱⁱ that the Spirit of God led the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt.

Forgetting that God is the giver of every good and perfect gift, Moses had to remind the people as they entered the Promised Land, **“Remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth ...”**^{iv}

In the story of Pentecost, Luke symbolizes the power of the Holy Spirit by **“the rush of a violent wind”** and **“divided tongues, as of fire.”** We can't control the Holy Spirit. Comparing the Holy Spirit with the wind, Jesus told Nicodemus, **“The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”**^v

Is it any wonder then that those who have been “born of the Spirit” seem to be so off-the-wall? A couple of years ago Tom Cruise appeared on Oprah Winfrey's TV show. In proclaiming his love for Katie Holmes, Cruise suddenly jumped up and down on the couch. “I've never seen you this way before,” Oprah said several times. “The boy's gone!”

Some people express their love for Jesus in an almost similar fashion. That's absolutely fine. Such ecstasy is even discussed in the Bible. One Sunday after worship, however, someone asked me why, when I entered the chancel and took my seat, I didn't look more Spirit-filled. I don't remember how I responded though I wish I had the presence of mind to say “Because I have the face only a mother could love.” I'm of Scottish ancestry, for crying out loud. My people aren't like that. At least not when they're sober. Now African-Americans and Hispanics, on the

other hand – that’s another matter. We’re all wired differently.

Back in March, 2006, when the basketball team from Louisiana State University made it to the final four, a deacon at the First Baptist Church of Luling delivered a mini-sermon just before leading in prayer. He said, "We're all excited about LSU getting into the Final Four." A chorus of amen's rose up from the congregation. "But it bothers me that I am much more excited about my basketball team winning than I am about the Lord Jesus Christ loving me. And that makes me ashamed."

Joe McKeever is the Director for Missions for the Baptist Association of Greater New Orleans. He wrote in his blog on March 28, 2006:^{vi}

I appreciated what [the deacon] said, and later handed him the following note: "If the Lord loved us as infrequently as LSU gets into the Final Four (every 20 years or so) on those rare occasions when He did, we'd be plenty excited."

The problem is it's hard to stay excited about a constant. Inherit a million dollars and you are ecstatic for a few weeks. Eventually, you come down to earth. No one who has been a millionaire for years goes around in a state of euphoria. The most beautiful girl in town agrees to marry you, and you're on cloud nine. But a year or ten years into the marriage, you're back to normal. No one can live on a mountain of excitement.

Fortunately, the Lord has not asked euphoria or even excitement from us. Just faithfulness and steadfastness. Those who measure a worship service by its emotional highs are missing the mark. As the old preacher used to say, "It's not how high you jump that impresses God but how straight you walk after you hit the ground."

Every time Tom Cruise jumped off the couch back on to the floor, he didn't walk very straight. He got more and more bizarre. Apparently he was too off-the-wall for most people. This past week he was on Oprah's show once again, making amends, and this time he was much more subdued.^{vii}

The power of the Holy Spirit is not always about ecstatic behavior, or about power as we usually understand it, such as showing our might as Russia did this past week – for the first time since the end of the cold war – missiles and tanks were paraded in Red Square. So this morning, if you have never met it before, I'd like to introduce you to the kinder, gentler Holy Spirit. I'm prompted by that same verse from Ephesians, this time with the added insight of *The Message*: **"God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us."**^{viii}

The Spirit accomplishes its work within and among us without pushing us around. How is that possible? It's a mystery, as mysterious as God's love. Remember, **"love does not insist on its own way."**^{ix} We shouldn't be surprised. If the Holy Spirit is the present tense of Jesus Christ (my favorite definition of the Holy Spirit the Spirit is not going to be something other or different than Jesus.

Listen to these words from the prophet Isaiah. **"Take a good look at my servant. I'm backing him to the hilt. He's the one I chose, and I couldn't be more pleased with him."**

I've bathed him with my Spirit, my life. He'll set everything right among the nations. He won't call attention to what he does with loud speeches or gaudy parades. He won't brush aside the bruised and the hurt and he won't disregard the small and insignificant, but he'll steadily and firmly set things right. He won't tire out and quit. He won't be stopped until he's finished his work – to set things right on earth.”^x

Do not those words describe the Jesus we meet in the four gospels? He doesn't push us around. **“Power is made perfect in weakness,”** said the Apostle Paul.^{xi} **“For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength ... God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.”^{xii}**

Just how is this gentle Holy Spirit manifested in our lives? In the story of Pentecost from the Book of Acts, Jews had gathered from every nation in the known world at the time for the festival of Pentecost and they spoke as many different languages. When the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them, they understood each other. A miracle of communication took place. **“How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language.”** Cynics thought everyone was drunk, but it couldn't have been too loud and raucous. One can't hear the other without listening. We can't listen if we're always talking!

StoryCorps is a series of recorded vignettes on public radio where people from every walk of life share a snippet of their life story. It is delightful listening. There is a compilation of some of the stories in a book, *Listening Is An Act of Love*. The introduction reads:

StoryCorps is built on a few basic ideas: That *our* stories – the stories of everyday people – are as interesting and important as the celebrity stories we're bombarded with by the media every minute of the day. That if we take the time to listen, we'll find wisdom, wonder, and poetry in the lives and stories of the people all around us. That we all want to know our lives have mattered and we won't ever be forgotten. That listening is an act of love.^{xiii}

Take note, Tom Cruise, and celebrities like him. Our stories are just as important as theirs. Peter quoted the prophet Joel – **“In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh...”** That means you and me! Our calling is first to listen – to one another's stories and to God's story. **“Be still and know that I am God.”^{xiv}**

The statement of faith we will read in a moment outlines three other manifestations of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit “creates and renews the church ... enables us to receive forgiveness (that is to really believe that God loves us in spite of our sin) ... and the Spirit gives us power to be representatives of Jesus Christ to all people.”^{xv}

How does the Spirit of God manifest itself through us? One of my favorite passages from Henri Nouwen addresses how best to be a representative of Jesus Christ:

Often we think that to witness means to speak up in defense of God. This idea can make us very self-conscious. We wonder where and how we can make God the topic of our conversations and how to convince our families, friends, neighbors, and colleagues of God's presence in their lives. But this explicit missionary endeavor often comes from an insecure heart and, therefore, easily

creates divisions.

The way God's Spirit manifests itself most convincingly is through its fruit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." These fruit speak for themselves. It is, therefore, always better to raise the question "How can I grow in the Spirit?" than the question "How can I make others believe in the Spirit?"^{xvi}

How can we understand the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives? It enables us to listen so that we might hear and in hearing that we might understand; it enables us to accept the fact that we are accepted – to really embrace the gospel of God's forgiving love; it ordains us as ambassadors of Jesus Christ; and most of all, it bears fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

i. Ephesians 3:20-21

ii. Genesis 1:1

iii. See Exodus 32:11

iv. Deuteronomy 8:18

v. John 3:8

vi. www.joemckeeper.com

vii.

Oprah Winfrey and actor Tom Cruise met at Cruise's home in Telluride, Colo., on Friday, April 25, 2008, where Winfrey taped a one-on-one interview with Cruise for "The Oprah Winfrey Show" airing on Friday, May 2, 2008. Then, on Monday, May 5, Cruise joined Winfrey at her Chicago studio to celebrate his 25 years in films since his breakout role in "Risky Business."

viii. Ephesians 3:20 (*The Message*)

ix. 1 Corinthians 13:5

x. Isaiah 42:1-4 (*The Message*)

xi. 2 Corinthians 12:9

xii. 1 Corinthians 1:24-27

xiii. By Dave Isay (New York: Penquin Press, 2007)

xiv. Psalm 46:10

xv. From *Confession of 1967*, Book of Confessions, Presbyterian Church (USA)

xvi. *Bread for the Journey*, (New York, HarperCollins, 1997), Reading for June 19