

## The Breath of God | *Keeping in Step with the Life-giving Spirit*

2 Corinthians 13.11ff; Philippians 2.1-13

### “The Fellowship of the Spirit”

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6.2.13

*Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. <sup>12</sup> Greet one another with a holy kiss. <sup>13</sup> All the saints greet you. <sup>14</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.*

*(Philippians 2) Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, <sup>2</sup> make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; <sup>4</sup> do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup> For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. <sup>12</sup> So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; <sup>13</sup> for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.*

Usually the sermons, during this part of the year are devoted to the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. We've been considering the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (just 50 days after the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ) and the way history changed after that event.

Last week, we looked at *LIVING* by the Spirit in that new kind of obedience He *animates* and *energizes*, an obedience that's not just because "I HAVE to" but because "it's my nature ...and I WANT to."

And *this* week we look at the Holy Spirit's work in *the alternative society He is bringing to life all over the world*, a City within the city – the Church.

And as we think of the Spirit working in the Body of Christ (the Church) we are again reminded that what God is doing in the world is much more than a kind of private experience given to so many isolated and separated persons like islands – *but He is building a community, a fellowship*

*of the Spirit (as it says in both the texts)*. AND we're also reminded that IN our day... these are strange words and difficult to understand BECAUSE...for years...decades...*the trend in our society has not been in the direction of community and togetherness* but in the direction of the private, the individual, and the personal.

So, today we look at how the gospel would change that trend and *how the Church stands as a true alternative to a fragmented society full of isolated individuals*. What does Christianity demand of the believer in terms of a shared life? And how would those demands, if actually met, how would that offer a refreshing alternative to this culture of rabid individualism? **So let's look at: 1) Extreme Demands 2) Extravagant Resources 3) Excellent Opportunity for Good and how to capitalize on it.**

The trend in our own culture is really not a new one. When Alexis de Tocqueville came in the mid 1800s from France (disillusioned that the French Revolution wasn't delivering what it had promised). And after studying American democracy he came away with a profound respect for this country but also saw some seeds of our own undoing. He wondered about the tyranny of the majority AND about our individualism.

In 1985 a group of sociologists from UC Berkley, led by Robert Bellah published a study called *Habits of the Heart - Individualism and Commitment in American Life* and that team warned that some of de Tocqueville's prophecies were coming to pass. Robert Bellah labeled the prevailing ethical outlook in post '60s America as "*Expressive Individualism*". Others called it "the duty to self ethic" i.e. that I am not only allowed to be a little selfish but I am obligated first to my self. And in 2000, a Harvard Political scientist, Robert Putnam wrote a book in this same vein titled, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Putnam said many traditional civic, social and fraternal organizations — like bowling leagues — have had a massive decline in membership... More people are bowling than ever before but NOW we're bowling alone.

And all this is to say: the recovery of community in our time and place is really an uphill climb! And then... you look at what the NT writers had in mind... and it looks radical... to OUR eyes it looks unreasonable!

Writing at the very end of a long and very difficult letter in which the Apostle Paul had to say a lot of relationally trying things — he'd been a pastor to this church and they turned on him and really betrayed him... And Paul HAS to BE open and honest about it and then ends the letter with these words, "Finally brothers, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like minded, live in peace..."

That does not sound like expressive individualism — it sounds like a depth of commitment and loyalty and brotherhood that strikes us as almost weird!

And then, writing from a prison cell, Paul writes to the young Christians at Philippi and says, *“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.”*

He pictures a church where people approach life in a unified (NOT individualized) way... a common mindset in which we share a common life-purpose and mission and common beliefs...Not as if there's no room for differing opinions but that the really BIG questions we answer the same way.

And humility... no empty conceit i.e. no trying to impress one another or intimidate one another, *“but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves.”*

And third, unity, humility and helpfulness, i.e. to actually learn how to promote the interests of other people and help them, *“look out for the interests of others, not just your own...”*

And that's radical to our ears...as I'm sure it was to their ears as well... They had their own peculiar trials; for us our affluence gets in the way, for them, their poverty and need got in the way.

But what makes the whole thing UNIVERSALLY radical is that it's all attached to a kind of example: *“have the same mindset that was demonstrated in Jesus Christ...”* He is equal with God but put aside that equality and became lower...became... a servant and humbled Himself and became obedient to the extreme... to death... even the worst kind of death ... the criminal's death...covered in shame and spit. He was committed to others, not Himself – go and do the same.

Now if I ended the sermon here you might take one of two routes: you could either say, *“Ahhh...that's so very sweet and interesting and challenging...”* (and saying that we might really mean – *“that's churchy talk and I'm glad we heard it but no one is supposed to do it so let's ... go to lunch!”*) OR... (and this is how you SHOULD feel if this were the end of the sermon) *“You gotta be kidding! Who could possibly live that way?... Who could live up to the example of Jesus Christ? That's CRUSHING!!!!...It feels very different from the way of grace...it's extreme.”*

But, thankfully, this is NOT the end of the sermon or story: it's not demands PERIOD (end of sermon) ...but extreme demands and extravagant resources!! What we need ... ALL we could possibly need to live in real authentic community...the resources are highlighted in these texts. Look at the outline in the second passage. It begins with the materials we need: v 1 : *“... encouragement in Christ ... consolation of love... fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion”*. It begins with an inventory of supplies. This is not a command to make bricks with out straw – it starts with the goods!

The same can be said of the first text: it's a blessing and even though it looks like commands, it's really a way of saying, "Go in peace!" You're brethren! Rejoice! (Be happy!)... become complete...be comforted...be like-minded ...live in peace..." The idea is, "YOU ARE UNDER THE CRAZY, EXTRAVAGANT, RIDICULOUSLY AMAZING LOVE OF GOD – EVERYTHING ELSE IS SMALL POTATOES!"

God loves you and has proven it by paying your ransom at infinite cost to Himself. He took responsibility for your great sin; He bore the consequences. In Jesus Christ, He took the role that belonged to YOU – He became obedient like you were supposed to be but weren't (not a single one of you!) *and then He took the role of criminal – the role that YOU deserved!* That CROSS was meant for YOU and He was lifted up between our sinful planet and the holy, holy, holy heaven and JUSTICE came from above and swallowed Him. He was treated as a lawbreaker IN YOUR PLACE. And now NO ONE CAN separate you from the love of God (we read it last week).

See, Paul wants us to trip over this and to encounter it in a new and surprising way. That's why he words it in this strange way in Philippians ch. 2: *it has the force of the word "since" but he words it to make us linger on it.* "If there is any encouragement in Christ..." AND IS THERE?

The reader has to answer in faith, "Yes, Paul, there is!" And IF there's any consolation of love...and IS there? "Yes, Paul, there is!" AND IF there is any fellowship of the Spirit...if any affection and compassion... AND IS THERE? Are these materials, are they or are they not in what God has done for us in the gospel?"

Yes! And are there any shortages? Of anything? – No! It's all there – I am a rebel and a bad investment and God has treated me like a priceless treasure so that He would rather stop existing than to lose me (see Gen. 15.8ff; Exo. 17.4-6). If I gave My very self for you – will I not give you extravagant supply of love so you can love one another? Yes, Lord.

And then the commands – which ARE big...and then the example of Jesus Christ which is even bigger and then a return to resources: Paul says, "I remind you, we're not obeying because people are watching – we don't obey in that old dead religious peer pressure way – we obey because God the Spirit is at work in us – and as important – because He is at work AMONG us – "God is at work in YOU ALL (You – plural!) to give us the want to and the power to obey in a way that pleases Him – the new kind of obedience.

You become holy by being in the place where God is at work and God is at work in the Church – God is at work among you.

Now, to the degree that we GET these supplies into our lives and sort of release them in the church – we set up a very powerful antidote to our societal ills. The Church becomes the salt and light, preserving and flavoring and guiding the secular world. We display an alternative to the

isolation so rampant and destructive in our society: an excellent opportunity! **Here are a few things we can expect AND some “how-to’s” as we put gospel resources to work in this task:**

#1) We can expect **Opposition** – and in that classic way of looking at the enemies of the spiritual life we can expect opposition from the world, the flesh and the devil. Paul was writing from a prison cell. In the first text, he was writing to Christians who had betrayed him. Lots of opposition!

Our culture as an expression of the world opposing God is selling us the “duty to self ethic” and expressive individualism” everywhere we turn! *Our sinful nature self-destructively seeks isolation.* AND the spiritual forces of evil know that as we live in true community we look like God (who exists in eternal community) and evil does not want the image of God restored in us. *It’s not easy to love others...and commit to peace and self-denial.*

*And one KIND of opposition we can expect is to deceive ourselves into thinking that this sermon is really for people who don’t attend church...but I do. Again, keep attending church but DON’T think that’s all there is to authentic gospel community.*

2) Expect **Fulfillment** – we become who we are declared to be and meant to be IN GOSPEL COMMUNITY – “Be made complete” says Paul and again, “Make my joy complete”. The Psalmist wrote, “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!” (Psa 133) We were made for community, for real relationships, for sharing life and actually helping one another and we will only become complete persons (*or as complete as possible in this life*) IN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY.

Now Some final How-to’s:

1. Greet one another, recognize each others “native insecurities”...
2. All the saints...i.e. broken barriers ...and connected to Christians all over the world...people like ME who don’t look “saintly” ...but are constantly called, by GOD, “saints!”
3. Hospitality...
4. Effort: (tough stuff Phil2.3!) and it’ll be a struggle
5. Live in daily expectation of God’s resources by faith (THERE IS encouragement ...consolation ...fellowship... affection ...compassion ... And they are accessed by faith - WE HAVE TO PREACH TO OURSELVES, to do that “IF-THEN” – self-persuasion!!
6. AWE and Praise – God is doing this...not just helping me succeed at work or get me an unexpected rebate check etc... but moving me to true obedience (from the renewed heart...not simply from external pressure (“Uh... oh... Paul’s here!! Shape up!!”)...God is in us...among us...

working in THE BODY (v.13 “at work in YOU ALL” – plural!) and instilling in us this Christ like attitude of self-giving.

### **The Communion**

6.2.13

Please come to the Table only if you are a Christian and connected to the Body of Christ by commitment, by vows...a baptized member of a Church you attend regularly...If you're not in that place (and are NT taking the bread and Wine) , please stay with us and pray and maybe come talk with me about getting connected.

There are two big paradoxes in today's second reading: we are working out our salvation and God is working in us – never an either/or and always a both/and

And second, the life of Jesus Christ tells us that the way up is down. The way to strength is to become weak. The way we really find life is to give up our rights and love others sacrificially. Jesus Christ lowered Himself as no other human being could – He's the Prince who became a Pauper.

In order to follow Him we need great grace – and God has it for us at this Table. So come now all who are weak in love and selfish... arrogant and proud but who want to love boldly. Come repenting and weak...come hungry for grace and God will fill you.

Let's expect to meet Jesus Christ and feed on Him TOGETHER!

Let's Pray.