

Sent by the Spirit in Love

When I last spoke, a couple of weeks ago, I talked about the love that God wants us to show to others, the love that breaks down walls between ourselves and people who think differently, who believe differently, than we do. I told some stories about how Christians who showed love found doors opening to them, like in the University in Prishtina, the capital of Kosovo, where they have decided to print 10,000 New Testaments in response to the power of the gospel to change lives and to give people hope. Another story was told by a pastor whose nephew was involved in killing people in the Bataclan theatre in Paris last November and he told about another pastor that he knew who had been invited to preach the Gospel in a mosque -- again, in response to love and forgiveness.

Today, I want to tell some more stories, but I want to first give a bit of context. Two weeks ago, right after church, Patti and I raced up to Whistler for a pastors and wives retreat that was put on by our Mennonite Brethren denominational leaders and staff. Two things that happened there will impact today's message. The first is that the speaker was Luis Palau, a man who has preached the gospel to over 25 million people in 70 countries and whose ministry of "festival evangelism" was launched with the support of Billy Graham way back in 1970. The second thing was that at each session -- and we had four sessions over two days -- a pastoral couple or two shared their story, and I want to include parts of one of those stories today.

The theme of the retreat was "Spirit-Empowered Ministry". Dr. Palau noted that we have neglected the powerful ministry of the Holy Spirit in a lot of what we attempt to accomplish as pastors and as churches, and that, if we want to see God's works in our day, we must learn to be led by the Spirit. This is so simple, so basic to what the Bible teaches, but it is also something that gets away from us very easily. It's second nature to us to figure things out on our own, choose a course of action and develop a strategy for pursuing that course of action. That's the way everybody does things, right? But the Bible teaches us a different way, the way of being led by the Spirit.

Let me tell you the first story to illustrate this. Two Christian men were on a motorbike in West Africa, on their way to visit a Muslim village some distance away. While they were on their way, the motorbike stopped working and they were stranded in the middle of the hot, dry desert, in a place where the closest village was known to be very hostile to Christians. They tried to fix the bike several times, but nothing was working and it was getting dark. Suddenly they heard the sound of loud crying, people wailing in the village. A passerby told them that the chief's wife had died and the people were wailing in response to her death. The two men went into the village, feeling quite nervous, and pushed their way through the crowd of people until they could see the corpse. The man who told the story said, "I felt a battle within myself. I've prayed for the sick, but never for those already dead. As the men wanted to start their ceremonies, Samuel pulled my sleeve: 'We should leave, now!' By then, I was really struggling. "If I pray and nothing happens, how can we get out of this place? What will they do to us?' But the inner voice kept saying, 'Go and pray.' The urgency was so strong, that I had to obey, so I

told the people that I wanted to pray for the chief's dead wife ... I just went up to the body and started to pray. It was a loud and violent prayer. God filled me with extraordinary strength to pray and continue praying for an hour and a half. I called her by name, asking God to revive her ..."

What strikes you about the first part of the story? I'm amazed that someone would keep praying for an hour and a half! 90 minutes of intense, what he describes as 'violent' prayer, without any sign that it's working, that an answer is on the way ... except the prompting of the Holy Spirit to keep on praying.

After awhile, the crowd started to get restless. They are angry at this intruder and start to say, 'Let's remove this man. He's wasting our time.' But he's starting to feel warmth in her hand and a weak pulse. And then, she opened her eyes. The people around started shouting, "She has opened her eyes! She has opened her eyes!" The women stop wailing and people start pressing in to get a closer look at the miracle, but the man keeps on praying. Then the woman sat up and asked, "May I have some water?" Someone ran up with water and suddenly everything is quiet and everyone is watching this woman take a drink.

The man continued his story: "The Spirit of God urged me to share about Jesus, so I spoke up: 'The greatness you are seeing is not because of us. We are just ordinary people. But there is a man named Jesus.' And then I told them about God's free gift of salvation and I prayed for them. When I finished my prayer, I was thinking about leaving. 'What if this is not permanent? Maybe she will die again, and we will be in trouble.' But the people would not let us go. They brought sleeping mats for us and put us in the room next to the chief's bedroom, and that is where we spent the night. Happily, the next morning the woman was still alive and she is still alive to this day."

Can you imagine what that led to? The chief lifted the ban which forbid anything to do with Christianity and offered them the community school as a place where they could pray for people. After a day of praying for people and sharing the good news of God's grace, 76 people gave their lives to Jesus - men, women and children.

Now, here's the tidbit of information that is key to this whole story. At the end of that wonderful day, the Holy Spirit spoke to the man again: "It was I who stopped you on the road and it was I who hindered you to leave this place." When they went back to check on the motorcycle, it started right away. Today, that whole region is filled with Christian churches, families of faith.

Some of you might remember our friend Joel Baerg who lived with us for a couple of school years and who often attended Silver Valley during those years. He has since married and he and Stephanie have two children and are living in Chengdu, a large city of over 14 million people near the Tibetan Plateau in central China. Last week I got an email from Joel and Steph asking for prayer for the people of the Plateau: Uyghur, Qiang, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Mongolian, Han Chinese and many others.

Here's a story of God's loving concern for people from the Tibetan Plateau:

“On the way home, we picked up an old man who wanted a ride. We noticed he was limping when we dropped him off - he had been injured the day before and his ankle was quite swollen. We shared with him in Tibetan and prayed for him, laying hands on him. Instantly, he was healed - it was so obvious as he walked and clapped his hands. We sent him on his way with a skip in his step and an MP3 player in his hand.

“A Jiarong lady who had watched the man be healed came up and told us about her hip that had been in pain. We prayed over her and once again God showed up! She felt heat and then the pain was gone! A third man was healed in his shoulder. He too felt heat and got a quizzical look on his face as he realized that his shoulder felt different. We then shared the gospel with him.”

At the end of this day of miracles, one of the workers made this comment: “Before, I believed in the Holy Spirit, but now I KNOW He is real and wants to work through us TODAY!”

This Holy Spirit is living in you -- He has been promised to us by Jesus Himself and when we come to faith in Christ, the Spirit of the Living God comes to live in us. Do you believe this? Here are some Scriptures that tell us where the Spirit makes His home:

If you love Me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counselor to be with you forever - the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. (John 14:15-18)

What does that passage tell you? It tells you that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus - He is Jesus' presence with believers. “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.” It tells you that the Spirit is the gift of the Father: “And I will ask the Father and He will give you another counselor to be with you forever - the Spirit of truth.” It tells you that this Spirit which was “with” the disciples during the ministry of Jesus would soon be “in” them, which took place after the Day of Pentecost a few weeks later. It tells you that the work of the Spirit is an absolute mystery to the world around us -- and they will have no grid for explaining His work because they can't see Him. And just a few verses later, Jesus repeats this same kind of thought with these words:

If anyone loves Me, they will obey My teaching. My Father will love them and WE will come to them and make our home with them. (14:23)

God makes this promise to everyone who loves Him, and the promise is His presence is always with us. In fact, how does the Gospel of Matthew end? “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

(28:20) The Spirit of God, present with the believer, can stall your motorcycle, tell you to pray for an hour and a half for a dead person and then open doors for you to preach the gospel where you had thought that it was impossible. The Spirit of God is all about bringing glory to God and He will do it in the wildest, most creative ways you could ever

dream of. And one of the ways He does that is to show us how much God loves people ... which brings me to another story.

I mentioned that we had testimony times at the pastors and wives retreat - times when a pastoral couple would share some of their journey. Two couples who live in roughly the same area -- I'm going to pretend it was Abbotsford -- shared on the same evening and their story was powerful. One couple, I'll call them Brian and Pam, talked about their four kids. The two oldest were girls and they loved being pastors' kids and loved church life. The two boys, Jeff and Shawn, had a different bent. At age 16, Jeff decided to test the limits, to try anything and everything for himself. His younger brother followed in his footsteps and paved the way for regular visits from the police and to the Emergency Room at the local hospital. One night Shawn was out with some friends, camping up the hill a mile or two from the family home. In the middle of the night he came crashing through the front door, wild with panic. His mum tried to talk to him, but for awhile there was nothing coherent coming from his ravings. Then she started asking direct "yes-no" type questions, ending with, "Is anyone dead?" Shawn answered that, yes, the worst had happened and one of the boys had had an extreme reaction to the drugs they were taking and had charged over the cliff to the rocks below.

Soon there were police there, search and rescue found the boy - he wasn't dead and has, in fact, made a pretty full recovery - but the night was filled with anxiety and remorse. Both parents were caught up in the terror of the moment and were finding it hard to connect to God.

Meanwhile, over in Europe, the other pastoral couple was enjoying a much-needed sabbatical from ministry and were getting ready to return to B.C. The husband, who I'll call Eric, had hiked up a hill to spend time with the Lord and it was his birthday. He admits that he was focusing on himself, wondering what the Lord might have for him on his birthday, when the Spirit put Brian and Pam on his heart. He was running down the hill, full of emotion -- not all of it that great -- when suddenly he was stopped short by an overwhelming sense of how much God loved Brian and Pam. It was such a powerful emotion that he was stopped in his tracks. "God, is this how much you love Brian and Pam?" he asked, feeling quite overcome with the emotion. "No, no," came the answer, "this is just the fringe of how much I love them." As soon as he could, he sent a text or email back to Canada, to his friends, trying to describe his experience of the deep and powerful love of God for them. They got the message in the middle of an anxious night of a son high on drugs, the possibility of the death of one of his friends, interviews with police officers and the cumulative grief of the direction in life their sons had been choosing.

God knew and God stopped a friend thousands of miles away with a message of encouragement and hope - "you're loved, I care, you'll make it through this."

Here's the reason for telling these stories today: God's love is not for a few; the gift of the Holy Spirit is not just for you and me and our families. The wonder of growing in a real and dynamic relationship with God is on offer to all who will believe and these

stories I've been telling these past couple of messages can be the stories that your friends and neighbors and workmates and classmates could be telling in the years ahead.

Christians have become intimidated by the culture's rejection of the gospel, to such an extent that we don't often tell people about our experience of walking in the power of the Spirit. The culture says that each person's spiritual journey is a private matter at the same time the government wants to check through your luggage at the airport and have access to your text messages and emails. They say that believing in a kind of generic 'god' is fine, but they don't want to hear the name of Jesus, at least not too loudly or too publicly.

And so some of us are reluctant to bring up that name in conversation or talk about our experience of knowing the freedom of forgiveness or the comfort of the Spirit's presence with us in hard times. We're afraid that people don't want to hear about our faith -- and I'm sure there are lots who don't. But there is a hunger growing in our land that will not be satisfied outside of knowing God. God loves the world so much that He gave His dearly loved Son so that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life. That depth of love should be rewarded and God's reward comes from us telling others about His love and having them respond in faith.

In Romans 10, Paul asks a series of questions:

How can they call on the One they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the One of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?

(Rom. 10:14,15)

Jesus sent us into the world. He calls us His witnesses and ambassadors of Christ, God making His appeal to the world through us (2 Cor. 5:20). How do we go and proclaim the love of God in this world? One of the most commonly used ways of sharing good news is through inviting people. I've already mentioned that Franklin Graham is coming to Rogers Arena next March and we could be praying now about who might respond to a gospel presentation given at a meeting like that. There is a new Alpha course out -- more on that next week -- and I would love for us to host an Alpha dinner here at St. George's in September and see how many sign up to take the full course. There are dozens of ways to respond to God's call to be His ambassadors - it reminds me of a meeting I attended quite a number of years ago in which someone gave a report on all the ways in which evangelism was being tried in the Lower Mainland. His conclusion was that everything that was being tried seemed to be working, but that not much was being tried. In other words, if we share our experience we can expect a response, but if we don't share the good news, we won't experience the joy of seeing folks come into a relationship with God through Jesus and be filled with new life through the Holy Spirit.

Invitation, though, is not the only way of sharing our faith. There is also the willingness to pray for people and ask God to do miracles in their bodies, in their relationships, in their life circumstances.

I'll close with one more story, again from the Tibetan Plateau from within the last month: A stone carver greeted the team who had come to his town with the words, "Savior Jesus!" It turns out he was carving "mani stones" which are rocks that have a mantra carved into them. He was carving the words "Savior Jesus" into stones because of a group of Christians who had been there a few years earlier.

This team asked him if he needed prayer for anything and he told them his wife had been sick for 3-4 years and the doctors had been unable to do anything for her.

We entered the tent and immediately saw her. She was pasty grey and looked like she was on her death bed. She was too weak to move. We gently placed our hands on her hands and face and prayed over her. Nothing changed the first time. We felt faith rise and began breaking curses. Then, we released healing and the goodness of Jesus over her again. Power went into her body! She said she felt "much better". The color was back in her face. She beamed a smile and didn't even look like she had been sick! It was wonderful to "give her back to her family!" Just like the Scriptures. Mighty God! The stone carver was shocked and super thankful. One of the team shared more about Savior Jesus with the family and asked if they would like this Jesus to live inside of them. The stone carver said yes and prayed to receive Him.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in this materialist western culture is to believe that God in His power and love has come to live in us and to use us to do His Kingdom works in our world today. We tend to approach life the way our culture does, and the Spirit is asking us to approach life with this profound awareness of His presence and His purpose filling our thoughts and guiding our actions.