

“What tends to Block God’s Spirit? What tends to open us to God’s Spirit?”

Sermon notes by the Rev. Arnold A. Bush, Priest in Charge, Episcopal Church of the Epiphany, Tallassee, AL 36078, Pentecost Sunday, 5.27.12.

Purpose sentence: Our God is always pouring out his presence and power upon us, but often we have BLOCKS OR RESISTANCES that prevent us from RECEIVING the gracious power of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives.

Texts: Gospel today: John 15:26 *“When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth whom goes out from the Father, he will testify about me.”*

John 20:22 *“And he breathed on them, receive the Holy Spirit.”*

Acts 1: *“Wait here in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”* Acts 2: *“While they were in one accord, the Holy Spirit came upon them.”*

I. Introduction: God’s desire of us

My understanding of God and the biblical record emphasizes that God desires every follower of His to be filled with His Holy Spirit. Thus, we have a life-long journey of receiving more and more of God’s presence. When one of us is confirmed in the renewing of our baptismal vows, the Bishop lays his hands upon us stating, *“Defend (make strong) your servant, with your heavenly grace, that she/he may continue yours forever, and DAILY INCREASE IN YOUR HOLY SPIRIT MORE AND MORE, until he/she comes to your everlasting kingdom. Amen.”* 2x more and more. You and I are not batteries that never need to be recharged; we are not combustible engines that never need to be refilled. We are created in such a way to always need more and more of His Spirit in our lives.

This sermon is about the BLOCKS OR RESISTANCES that tend to keep us from receiving the power of the Spirit in our lives. Secondly, the sermon will identify some behaviors and attitudes that tend to open more doors to the power of the Spirit. We have new doors in our church building; we need to keep our personal doors open in our lives.

II. The impressive evidence and images of this Day of Pentecost

Biblical context of the chronology offered by Luke (who also wrote the Book of Acts): Luke covers Christ’s suffering unto death on Good Friday, his resurrection on Easter, His several resurrection appearances, his promise to wait in Jerusalem for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, his ascension into the empty sky, and then--50 days after the Passover--Jesus returns in the form of the Holy Spirit. From Luke’s description of the Day of Pentecost, this is a very significant event.

- A sudden, mysterious wind in the house where some 120 were gathered.
- The tongues of fire that came upon each of them.
- All the believers speaking in unknown tongues and languages understanding each other.
- Thousands were in Jerusalem for one of three pilgrim feasts, which celebrates the giving of the LAW. The disciples were declaring the wonders of God in their own languages.
- The giving of prophesies, visions, and dreams to all God’s people with the magnificent response of 3000 converts.

Lots of dramatic things were happening.

III. Our resistances, why we neglect to ask

1. A SELF-SUFFICIENCY ATTITUDE of depending upon our own skills and abilities. Needing help or asking for assistance implies that I am helpless, incompetent, or just weak. Needless to say, we want persons who are highly skilled, competent, with skills and abilities. As a Jewish writer, Luke was certainly aware of the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. In the Genesis story the Hebrews came together to build a city without God's help. They wanted to make a name for themselves, not depend on God, not give Yahweh the credit, and not ask for his assistance. We know the story: God created different languages, which caused them to fail in building a massive tower, and their different languages divided them. Sometimes persons in our culture attend college, vocational schools, even graduate schools where one learns to use many skills and abilities in their work. Within these educational settings some folks receive a heavy dose of SELF-SUFFICIENCY. I can do this project, this job, this procedure depending totally on my skills and abilities and thus do not need any help from God. For example, I recall speaking to Air Force jet pilots at Eglin AFB in Niceville about the advanced skills in flying F15 and F16 jets. A few pilots tend to forget about asking God for help as they continue in their competence of flying. A few just say, "I do not need God, the church, any spiritual assistance." As a parish priest, I recall having attended a four-day seminar on management or leadership skills. I can recall returning to the congregation to implement these skills and procedures. We need to ask ourselves where we are on a SELF-SUFFICIENCY SCALE.
2. SOME FOLKS CARRY A SELF-CONCEPT OF UNWORTHINESS.
I can name several persons in my Christian journey who have adopted a self-image of "I am not worthy to ask God for anything." In counseling moments, some folks have digested a bucket of shame, poor self image, I'm not worthy to ask God. I often ask, are you about to ask God for more grace in your life? Some will answer, "why that would be selfish, and we are not supposed to be selfish." Or the response is "I am not worthy to ask for his grace in my life." Thus, I ask all of us this Pentecost to examine ourselves to ask: Where am I on the scale of unworthiness?
3. Another block we have is OUR MADNESS. Christians may be in the "Evangelical," "Charismatic," or "Social activist" camp. Some Christians are just MAD. They are mad and upset about anything on the TV or new media. For example, a few weeks ago at my high school reunion I had a chance to visit with some "old" classmates. Most of them grew up in the days where 90 % attended a church in Laurel, MS. Most of the folks were happy, loving Christians, enjoying their church life. But I met a few classmates who were just MAD. Mad, angry, upset, playing the game of "Ain't it awful." They had hot buttons on gay marriage, abortion, evolution in public schools, prayer in public schools, health care legislation. You name it, they had a chronic disease of--not mad cow disease--but Mad Mississippi Citizen disease. In all their being "right" all the time, they were seldom concerned about asking the Holy Spirit to give them a spirit of compassion. You may have head the phrase from the person who is so upset over the political defeats: *"There is so much tribulation in my life, I am about to lose my blessings."* Again,

where are you on the scale of “Upsetness, madness at one end of the scale to the other end of finding contentment by opening yourself to the Holy Spirit”?

4. Next, many in living in our American culture have an indifference to spiritual matters. Pollster George Barna, a sort of George Gallup in religious matters, writes that most Americans want to embrace “family values and high morals.” However, according to Barna’s research, Americans endorse high morals but want to live their lives unrelated to any supreme authority. Many are endorsing a moral relativism and saying there is no objective Truth. Also, the more educated American citizens have less dependence on God and thus simply depend upon their own resources in everyday life.
5. AN UNFORGIVING SPIRIT OR ATTITUDE: I used to be amazed at the number of active church members who are walking around with massive amounts of bitterness and grudges. These clog up the channels to receive God’s grace. In the Easter gospels, we read in John 20 that Jesus said, “If you forgive the sins of many, that will be forgiven.” E.g. A clogged AC drainage PVC pipe in my attack. The AC/H professional recommended pouring Clorox in this PVC pipe to prevent blockage within the PVC. A bitter and unforgiving heart can clog up the channels of reception. Do you know someone who needs a “spiritual roto-rooter” to remove the roots of bitterness? Last year this congregation studied Father Dennis Maynard’s *Forgive and Get your Life Back*. St. John’s NAS, Pensacola also studied this helpful book. I learned that at some level all of us have issues with a lack of forgiveness that blocks our receptivity to the Spirit. Where are you on the scale of bitterness and forgiveness?
6. MEDIOCRITY AND THE SATISFIED NON-SEEKING CHRISTIAN: This is the Christian who attends worship with some regularity, who knows the basic biblical stories, who knows their ticket is punched in heaven, but they are drifting into a spiritual mediocrity. There is not fire in their soul to grow in their relationship with Jesus. They are good, moral citizens but lack a desire to seek guidance or strength from Christ. As we read in the Gospel a few weeks ago, the joy in the Lord is not full. They are lacking in a bubbling sense of joy and fulfillment in their daily life. They have little understanding of receiving the Spirit of Jesus into their life. Where are you on the scale between a Christian mediocrity and one seeking to become a devoted follower of Christ?
So these are some resistances we may have in our attitudes and behaviors. Now let us identify some ways to make us more open to the Holy Spirit in our everyday lives.

IV. Ways we can open the door to receive the Spirit of Jesus

Often I have taught courses on deepening one’s prayer life and growing in one’s spiritual life. Sometimes participants see the course as a way of learning a new style of prayer, a new type or another technique in prayer. Learning types of prayer are important, but the foundational truth is JESUS WANTS A RELATIONSHIP WITH EACH OF US. HE IS SEEKING YOU OUT. HE IS WILLING TO IMMERSE (BAPTIZE YOU) WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT.

1. What are your images of the Holy Spirit? In the description of the Day of Pentecost note the verbs: outpouring, flooding, raining, filling the whole house, a mighty wind rushing into the Upper Room. In Act 2, Peter quotes the prophet Joel, “*in the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will*

- prophesy, your young men will see visions and old men will dream dreams.*" I exhort you to keep these images in your mind in your self-talk to God. In a survey done a few years ago by Baylor University, the survey question was: What is your basic picture of God? % benevolent God; % Judgmental God, % a distant God, etc. What is your working image of God? Compassionate, pouring into you His Holy Spirit, aloof, distant, uninvolved?
2. **Admitting Our Need:** For some it is very difficult to admit our need or to ask for help. If you were to survey all the citizens of Central Alabama, asking them why they are in church on Sundays, they would answer, "I have a need for God in my life." If you took all the psychology courses in our universities about identifying all the human needs, you would understand Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs. But our greatest need is the need to know God in the depths of our soul. I will never become so strong, so intelligent, so mature, so skillful, so competent, so whatever. I know I will always need the Holy Spirit. I do not have a battery inside of me that will never need charging. I need to open myself to God as I understand him every morning I wake up. If I do not wake up, I will be with God. In the Letter of James 4:2, James writes: "You do not have because you do not ask." Where are you on the scale of asking for help, never...always?
 3. **Inviting Him into the routines of you daily life:** One thing about life is that it is so daily. The same can be said about marriage. We have daily routines, bathing, eating, sleeping, driving, using the keyboard or touch screen, stretching, walking, watching the news or favorite TV, surfing the channels or internet, and counting calories. I recall a physician speaking to a senior adult group saying, "you have more time, less demands, take some time to breathe deeply." Make a conscious effort to invite Jesus to be in your routines.
 4. **Singing in the Spirit:** Ephesians 5:18-19: Singing with others and in parish choirs can be very therapeutic for one's mental health. A well-informed and highly respected Ph.D. psychologist and member of St. Andrew's Cathedral said, "There is a lot of good group therapy going on in the choir practices every Thursday night." Singing provides moments for the Holy Spirit to touch our emotions and give us a sense of Christ's presence in our lives. Listen to what Paul says about music: Eph.5: 18-19 "*Do not get drunk with wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music (melody) in your heart in the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father in everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" I recommend you purchase Christian music on CDs and sing along with the inspiring words. Listen to it while driving or doing a task in your household. The praise of God provides the power of God.
 5. **Take steps outside of your comfort zone:** In all the lectures on leadership and management, the presenters always challenge the audience to step outside their comfort zone. One of the benefits of joining in Diocesan or other parishes in short-term missions is to help team members work outside their comfort zone. I recall hearing the testimony of persons on the mission trips in the Central Gulf Coast say,

"I developed a sense of dependence on the Holy Spirit and more awareness of his presence." One vision I have is that 50% of our membership would go on a short-term Diocesan Mission Trip in 2013. Please note the petition in the Prayer of Thanksgiving on page 836 in the BoCP: *"We thank you also for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone."* On self-examining reflection, where is God calling you to step outside your comfort zone?

6. Praying for expressed needs in a small study or Bible group often give us a renewed sense of God's Power. Suppose you are in a small group of 8 in a Bible study group or Daughters of the King group. The question to check in with each other is "How can we help you in prayer?" Prayers of thanksgiving or a prayer about some issue, concern, or stress in your life. At the beginning or end hands are held and each person articulates their thanksgiving or expressed needs. This seems to work with a group of 6-8 persons. E.g., Vestry meetings in Christ Church, a large church in San Antonio.

Conclusion and Prayer: All of us have behaviors that tend to block the Holy Spirit's working in our lives (review list). God is always wanting a deeper relationship with us. Lord, you are always quietly knocking on the doors of our hearts. May we use some of these ways to open ourselves to your loving power and presence?

7. Live outside your comfort zone, see BoCP, page 836
8. Pray for the Little Rocks as well as the Small Rocks.