

Rare Beasts and Unique Adventures

John Wilkinson

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

June 23, 2019

I Corinthians 12:4-11 and Mark 1:16-20

There is an old story that goes something like this: A woman wandered into a Presbyterian church on a Sunday morning, sat down in a pew, and joined in the service, which was already underway. Everything went according to the prescribed order: hymns, prayers, readings. When the minister stood up in the pulpit and began to preach, however, the woman became suddenly very animated and vocally responsive. "Yes," she said out loud, when she heard the minister make a point she liked. "Yes, that's true." "Preach it," she said a few minutes later, and a bit louder.

People began to shuffle and squirm uneasily; some turned around in their pews to see who was doing this extraordinary thing.

"Amen," she shouted.

An usher, discreetly, and very politely, of course, approached her and whispered, "Ma'am is there something wrong? Can I help you? Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine," she said. "I'm fine. I've got the Spirit!"

Whereupon the usher paused for a moment and replied, "Well, that may be ma'am, but you didn't get it here."

I've got the Spirit. Presbyterians, sometimes known as God's "frozen people," actually have a very high doctrine of the Holy Spirit, whether we know it or not, or even like it or not. The Spirit, whose coming we marked just two weeks ago on the day of Pentecost, empowers everything – our thinking, our work, our very lives. We pray a prayer of illumination before hearing the word because without the Spirit's inspiration, these are just words on a page.

Karl Barth called the Spirit "the power" ...

- the power that is present and active;
- the power which is superior to theology itself;
- the power which is sovereign over, and which upbuilds, and sends forth the church.

That last one matters this morning. The Spirit empowers the church and sends it forth. And the good news is...we've got the Spirit.

But that's just the start of the good news.

The Spirit gives you gifts, gives me gifts, gives us...gifts. Gifts to serve, in the church, in the world. Transforming gifts that transform.

The Apostle Paul is writing to a little struggling church in Corinth, a church trying to figure out what it meant to *be* church, how the church would find traction amidst competing religions and an uncertain belief system, a rather unremarkable collection of people with a questionable future.

In words we often read at ordination and installation services, Paul reminds *that* church and *this* church of the variety of gifts the Spirit gives. Everything we need, actually. And there is that list, healing, wisdom, discernment.

It is so readily portable to the 21st century, because the point is we have all the gifts we need, right here in this room, to be the church the Spirit calls us to be, to re-imagine and re-envision, to discern what's next in church and culture, to recalibrate our understanding of mission and service to the world, making the walls of the church "in here" and the world "out there" ever more permeable, to be informed by ancient theological constructs in ways that do not constrict but liberate.

We have those gifts. Not some of us, but all of us. Everything needed to be the church in 2019 and beyond.

Paul pledges to us: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good...all activated by the Spirit..." Those are not empty words, but a promise. Believe it. Because you have the Spirit, you are gifted.

But the news gets *even* better, because we are called to do something with those gifts. There is work to be done.

If the vote you all cast in a few moments goes a certain way, you will soon learn that there are favorite words in my wheelhouse. Either I use them too much or I use them just right, but either way, I believe in them. “Gratitude.” “Reconciliation.” “Abundance.”

Another word you will hear me use frequently is “stewardship,” which is about money (even when we say it isn’t), and about so much more. How are we *stewards* of the gifts God gives us in abundance by the Spirit? By using them. By investing them.

Look at what happens in the familiar call story from Mark. Jesus is out and about in the north country. He sees two people, fishing. “Follow me,” he says, “and I will make you fish for people.” “Follow me.”

Already, even before Pentecost, Jesus knows these ones to have the Spirit, to be gifted, to have something to contribute to this ever-growing ministry. Notice what does *not* happen. No credentials are requested. No theological examination. No credit check. No audition. Simply an invitation...follow me.

He sees more fisher people, and he calls them, and he keeps calling, broadening and widening his circle with the unexpected and unlikely, those who were and are oftentimes rejected by polite society and religious convention.

(Parenthetically, this is a reminder to us as we think about our mission – pay attention to the people Jesus paid attention to. And also, parenthetically, there is another reminder. Today, and the kind of odd meeting to follow, is about pastoral leadership, a particular call. But its specificity makes it no more important than anyone’s call. At our best, we Presbyterians remember what Paul says even as Jesus calls us – that all are given gifts, fully and equally, and all are called to serve.)

This episode, and all the call stories in the gospels, is mostly about Jesus – it is Jesus who does the calling, rather than us volunteering. But it is clear in the story that if it were not for some kind of response, the impact would be diluted. Will

we trust the call, or not? Will we share our gifts, or not? Will we follow, or not? Will we risk, or not? That is a question we answer once, and then again and again and again, day by day, opportunity by opportunity, lifetime by lifetime.

A newer hymn by John Bell from the Iona Community in Scotland asks us, in Jesus' voice: "Will you come and follow me if I but call your name/ will you go where you don't know and never be the same?" Will you? Will we?

That's been the question from the start, to James and John, all those original fisher people. It's the question that comes right down to us at this very minute. Will you come and follow me, and never be the same? Will you come and follow me and experience the deep fulfillment that following can offer, to be transformed spiritually, to make a difference in people's lives, in the life of the world?

My hunch is that it's always been a vexing question, in every age, every era, where the church has gathered in order to be sent out to serve. But it's certainly an interesting question now. I believe that what we do and who we are – the church asking questions about faith and life, welcoming people in to send them out, working for justice and reconciliation in the world – the church is needed as much now as it ever has been.

And yet we read the paper or scroll through our phone and know we're not automatically a product anyone would invest in. To many we seem irrelevant, or curious, or – more broadly cast – off-putting or offensive. We are either fighting with ourselves or behaving badly, and people look at us and wonder "why on earth would I sign on for all that?" *We know better.*

So we have work to do. Long gone are the days when people simply show up to church because it's the thing to do, the cultural expectation. It's one of the many things we are called to re-think, a conversation that includes words like "branding" and "marketing" but that goes much deeper than that. It means that to the world we will have to show – as the song from my youth reminds us – "that we are Christians by our love." People will be intrigued *by us* because they will see *in us* the kind of meaning-seeking, joy-producing, world-changing enterprise that engages rather than avoids, that calls people into relationship rather than transaction. It is about creating safe and courageous space to welcome, to doubt, to create. To experience joy and passion, and also to be in solidarity when things,

when life, doesn't go well. Because we also know we assume some risk when we drop the nets, drop our comfort level, drop whatever needs to be left behind and take that first step, and the next, and every step to follow, and invite people to join us for the journey.

And to that journey. We live in a data-driven society, and that's fine. In Rochester, we are working on public education reform, and we use phrases like "evidence based" a lot. And we must. And we must in the church, somehow. But at the end of the day, there is no metric for faithfulness, and joy, and reconciliation, and love. No metric, except Jesus continuing to call people like you and me with the expectation that something faithful can happen.

In the middle of the last century, British-American poet W.H. Auden wrote this:

"He is the Way./ Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;/ You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures./

He is the Truth./ Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;/ You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years./

He is the Life./ Love Him in the World of the Flesh;/ And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy."/

We do not know, exactly, what those gifted fisher people thought they were signing onto when Jesus called them and they dropped their nets. Even as we do not know, exactly, what we are signing onto when we drop our nets. But, we have the Spirit, and we are called and given gifts, and the need is so huge. The call comes with no guarantee. But it does come with a promise – "rare beasts and unique adventures." I am grateful, so grateful, to share that journey with you. Amen.