

SERMON: "THE SPIRIT ... FEEDS US WITH THE BREAD OF LIFE"

**TEXTS: NEW TESTAMENT 1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-26
NEW TESTAMENT ACTS 6:1-7**

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Dr. Dave Kivett

INTRODUCTION

Part of officer training for our leaders, elders and deacons, is to read through and study the confessions of the church. That includes ancient creeds like the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed, confessions from the Reformation and modern confessions like the one we use today, "The Brief Statement of Faith" commissioned to celebrate our reunion in 1983
Presbyterian, like most other churches, were divided by the Civil War

When officers are asked to name their favorite confession, many choose this one citing the more modern language. One thing I like about it is the detail. This confession, compared to the Apostles' Creed, tells us more about what Jesus did and what the Spirit does. The work of the Spirit as outlined in this statement of faith, is our focus in this sermon series.

The Spirit is busy in all sorts of ways. Johnny got us started last week talking about how the Spirit sets us free and binds us together. This week we skip ahead just a bit, since it is a communion Sunday to focus on how the Spirit feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation. I'll get to that in a bit

The first thing I want to make sure you hear is a simple, bold statement
This statement reminds us that the Spirit at work today with and through us is the same Spirit who was and is at work in the stories of scripture.
This section of the work of the Spirit begins with the truth that ...
*"the same Spirit who inspired the apostles and prophets
rules, engages, claims, feeds and calls us" today*

The same Spirit who inspired the apostles and prophets is at work through us.
That's how it was. And how it is. That is humbling, inspiring and empowering.

You know I've been lucky to travel. I've been to Geneva, touched the pulpit from which our spiritual ancestor, John Calvin, preached during the Reformation. I've been to Dr. Kings churches, Dexter Avenue Baptist and Ebenezer Baptist. I've walked across the Edmund Pettis bridge in Selma. I've been to Nelson Mandela's prison cell on Robben Island.

I was inspired to be in these places. I felt connected to my heroes and their work
I felt empowered to continue their work, my work, our work ... the Spirit's work.

THE CHALLENGE OF OUR DAY AND TIME

That work faces great challenges here and now. Much of the work of my heroes from the Civil Rights movement is being systematically and abruptly erased and overturned not by legislation, but by executive order. The Spirit leads me today to talk with you about news stories you may not have seen amidst all the other news. I share this as a prayer concern and a pastoral concern

Being a student of history, of civil rights, it is clear that every advancement this nation has known has involved the actions of the federal government
The presence of Federal troops in the South during Reconstruction and the violence, including the rise of the Klan, after they were removed
The national guard protecting children in integrating schools.
Laws drafted and signed and enacted and enforced

That is no longer the case. Senior staff, civil servants, of the Civil Rights Division has been reassigned to other duties or have resigned. Voting rights cases are being dropped. No more arguments against racial gerrymandering.
The voting rights act of 1965 is the law, but is not being enforced

It is being ignored. That is the prayer concern I share. Pray for those doing the work to tackle the reality of discrimination - past and present. And doing so now with the law, but without the leadership of the federal government

The new focus from Washington is on "Anti-Christian bias."
That is the pastoral concern I feel called to share. In my ten plus years with you I have tried to preach the truth in love, including hard truths.
The hard truth I share today is that "Anti-Christian" bias is not true
We are not victims. We are not being discriminated against.

If you feel differently, if my saying that upsets you ... I sincerely pray you and I can sit down and listen to each other. That is my pastoral concern
For ten years, you have listened to me and I have listened to you,
listened when something I said upset you and you wanted to talk.
Those have been helpful conversations

I've listened to your constructive criticisms. I've watched the sermons you sent
Read the articles and books you passed my way. I've sought out several of you to hear your perspective, ask for your input. I'm not going to preach hard truths with my mouth and then close my ears. Please talk to me

I am very worried about this shift from protecting the rights of those who have known (and still know) discrimination to fighting for me, like me a straight white Christian man ... I am now somehow a victim of discrimination.
How does that worldview reconcile with my call to love my neighbor as myself?

As your pastor, I am asking you to talk with me about that call to love neighbor
What does that look like for you and for your neighbors?
I ask you give me time to finish chemo, (say after July 4) then let's talk
I will listen and will love you where you are (always have, always will)

That said, I will not be silent about hard truths ... not from the pulpit,
not in public, not in person with you. I love you too much to let you
get comfortable with any prejudice that keeps you from loving your neighbor

Now back to the sermon I wrote earlier. About the work of the Spirit
The same Spirit at work then and there, here and now

BREAKING BREAD TOGETHER

That means that the same Spirit that was present when Jesus broke bread
to celebrate Passover with his disciples, the last supper, that would become
the Lord's supper, holy communion ... that Spirit is at work here, today.
Yes, in and through this meal, this sacrament. But also in our meals
our meals together like in these verses from Acts and I Corinthians.

That togetherness takes intentionality. Division (sadly) seems easier
than multiplication when it comes to us humans. That is true in churches
and was true in the early church. Our passage from Acts names that.

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

Yes, they formed a committee. And yes, this is a sermon about the Spirit
feeding us with the bread of life. And yes, God does this important work
of feeding people, of making sure there is room at the table for all
(no matter the language they speak – the issue here in this passage)
And does so through a committee. The Spirit works through committees

The Spirit is at work when we have a shared meal, "A Meal for Everyone"
And at work through Lemonade on the Lawn, and Sunday Supper, and
the reception after a memorial service. These things, and others like them,
don't just happen. A group of people did the work, often behind the
scenes. When healthy I like to be part of that work ... and take credit for it!

TOGETHER WITH CHRIST

When people come together and share a meal ... bridges get built
I think about how well Anthony Bourdain introduced us to other cultures
through food, by listening, by trying new things, by practicing hospitality

That is one thing the Spirit does feeding us at this shared meal – at communion
The Spirit calls us together as a community. Makes it happen really
Even more so than my mom, Annie, and her enforcement mechanisms
The look, the headshake, the hand slap, the quick kick under the table
for making sure her boys behaved themselves, like a family. at the table

Paul may not have been a dad with a swift and corrective kick like Annie
But he made it clear that this table is for coming together, not doing things
our own way and in our own time – hurrying or keeping others waiting

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!

That is pretty clear. Anthony Bourdain and Ann Kivett would concur
But what really sets Paul's consul above even my mom's (sorry Annie)
is that he makes it clear this shared meal is a feast shared with Christ
He is the host. Jesus is spiritually present with us. A committee prepped.
But Jesus is the one who, in his own way, puts bread on the table

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

These are far more than words recounting what happened back when
These are instructions for us to follow ... "For whenever you eat"
And even more so in saying "do this in remembrance of me."

SUMMARY

When we remember someone, what are we doing? We are seeing
and sensing their presence with us as we name their name.

When we come to this feast hosted by the resurrected Christ
We are in communion with him and with each other
It is a meal when and where we remember Jesus at table – past
It is also a meal present with him, with his people – present
And it is a meal looking ahead to a heavenly banquet - future

Did you watch the funeral mass for Pope Francis? We did.
It was a fitting memorial for a man who dedicated himself to a life
of humble service, love of God and neighbor. One of things
I most appreciated was how the service blended that humble service
with the pageantry and power of his office, of the Church

My favorite part though was the eucharist. I wondered aloud how they might
balance the offering of the sacrament to non-Catholics. Would it somehow
be a closed table (doubted that given the pope's life and legacy)

I watched closely as the bread of life and cup of salvation were distributed
Priests were going here and there and everywhere, including to the crowds
standing behind the rails in the back – not just the VIPS,
but the 'you's' and 'me's', the us's and them

I loved that image – bread of life shared ... and not just there
Not just in space but in time

When we share this meal with Christ as host, I see ...
Jesus of Nazareth celebrating a Passover meal with his friends
I see the risen Jesus at table in the banquet hall of heaven, a dinner party
And I now see, thanks to that memorial mass, all of St. Peters Square
all who wish to share in that feast fed with the bread of life

And I see, as I have for quite some time now ...
All the saints who from their labors rest, including my parents

And at that shared, blended family feast I'm not too worried about Annie's
table behavior enforcement tools. I tend to think it is our host is the one
who will give me that look if I start acting like the person next to me
doesn't belong there. They do. We do. We all do.

The table is set. Come share the feast!