

**Catching The Spirit
First Christian Church
July 10, 2011**

**Pastor Joshua Sawyer
Omaha, Nebraska
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost**

The Ground Work

Our passage today comes from Romans 8:1-11. A number of commentaries stated that the book of Romans was the pinnacle of Paul's work. And in regard to the chapter and verses, the New Interpreters Commentary conveyed that, "Many regular Bible readers will find this passage almost too well known to be any longer audible. As was once said of Shakespeare's Hamlet, 'It is full of quotations.'"ⁱ

The book of Romans is believed to have been written somewhere around Corinth later in Paul's missionary career (after Paul had written 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon and 2 Corinthians; only Colossians comes later), sometime in the mid to late 50's (Almost 30 years after the death of Jesus).ⁱⁱ It is addressed to Jews and Gentiles, alike; in fact, one gets the feeling that it is addressed to anyone with ears to hear.

As we listen, it would be good of us to pinpoint key words and ideas. The word Spirit is written 11 times in 11 verses. If we looked at the entire eighth chapter we would see the Spirit mentioned an additional 18 times. Paul pairs the word Spirit with life, peace, freedom, belonging, and righteousness. The word Spirit is contrasted with flesh, death, the law, sinful nature, and condemned.

These words and ideas found in this pericope have been hotly contested over the years, creating both heretics of the church and dogma for the church. In

this passage the patriarchs and matriarchs found evidence for the Trinity (e.g. As Paul uses phrases the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ interchangeably). The heretic Marcion used this passage to reject the Hebrew Bible (e.g. As Paul expounds upon the powerlessness of the law). Docetists, another heretical sect, purported that this passage proved that Jesus was not really man, but only a Spirit who seemed to be flesh and blood because God cannot bleed or be killed (e.g. As Paul speaks of God sending his son in the likeness of sinful flesh). And the list goes on and on.

As the reader comes up, I invite you to take a moment to breath in and breath out, ridding ourselves of whatever obstacles are in our way today of hearing this word and experiencing the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life. Now may we hear the word of God...

Scripture: Romans 8:1-11

Prayer

Fire flies in flight

In my backyard, on the edge of where the light grey cement, hot from soaking in the sultry summer sun, met the cool green grass, my siblings and I would gather periodically. We gathered when the sun was preparing to be swallowed by the land; at that enchanted time, we watched and waited for the spectacle: when fire flies would take flight.

One bug would begin the show, and then another burned brightly, and before we knew it our own planetarium was created. First Cassiopeia, then Cepheus, they concluded their choreographed dance with Orion, decked in his

shiny belt. We would stand mesmerized, for a moment, before beginning our pursuit of these tiny little harbingers of light.

I remember the trick to catching these elusive little insects: 1) To begin it was important to broaden my gaze, allowing myself to take in every square inch of the yard; 2) then, it was paramount to wait for the first flash of light within a reasonable distance; 3) at the moment when that bug flashed its light, a dash was made always keeping my eye in the area where the light was first emitted; 4) finally, when the little bug was spotted, flapping its wings furiously, one sure sweep of the hand was made from right to left; thus securing my own little night light.

Truth be told, I haven't seen a Fire Fly in a long time. I assume these magical creatures still exist (Have any of you spotted them this summer, dancing among the night sky?) I imagine they are still performing for others who stand on the precipice of wonder and amazement. Perhaps I need to begin looking again, for these little harbingers of light.

Where do you spend your time gazing? What do you spend your time looking for? So much wonderment seems to go unnoticed. We are such a busy people running to and fro from day to day, or from moment to moment. We, or at least I because I do not want to speak for you, become consumed by tasks, buried in to-do lists and obligations, so stuck in today that I sacrifice tomorrow and so worried about tomorrow that I squander today. I question what it would look like to retrain my mind to see the world, anew. Will you wonder with me?

This is at least part of what Paul is sharing in his letter to us today, a new way of existing in the world. He provides two options, either, 1) we are living according to the flesh or 2) we abide in the Spirit (I would submit to you that there may be a little more grey than this, that perhaps we are better at living in the Spirit in some aspects of our lives and we are better at living in the flesh in others).

For Paul, there seems to be a clear difference between life of the Spirit and life of the flesh. Where we are stuck in the flesh we find detachment from God, degradation of our bodies, disenchantment with our surrounding, death to our longings... Conversely, when we are caught up in the Spirit we find life, the type of life that fills us up and calls out to others to join us in our hopes and dreams; we find peace that transcends our differences; we find freedom from the shackles that have held us captive.

Can you think of the last time you experienced this life-giving Spirit? Was it this morning as you walked into church or yesterday during Shakespeare on the Green, last week or last month, has it been years? For me I often tap into the Spirit when I travel or explore, whenever I set my feet to the pavement to run, when Lexi and I take our dog Ballou on a walk around Memorial Park on summer nights, dinners with family, or when Lexi and I meet friends at Dario's for beers.

What if we began to spend our time together as people seeking and cultivating this Spirit? What if we began looking for and pursuing those places

that make us more fully alive? What would happen to us and the world around us if we committed ourselves to such things?

It is my prayer, over the course of our time together, that we would broaden our gaze in order to see the places that the Spirit shines, as individuals and as a community of faith; that we would learn to spot the Spirit in our surroundings; that we would dash toward the Spirit when we witness its work; that we would wait patiently as we confirm the Spirit's presence and then that we would reach out and catch the Spirit so that in it we may abide and belong and become the people God is calling us to be...Amen.

ⁱ Wright, N.T., *The New Interpreters Bible, Vol. X*, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002, p. 573.

ⁱⁱ Wright, N.T., *The New Interpreters Bible, Vol. X*, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002, p. 396.