

Finding the Spirit Outside the Church

Matthew 27:50-54

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⁵⁰Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and gave up his Spirit. *breathed his last.* ⁵¹At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵²The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.

⁵⁴Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

[NRSV, note that in verse 50 I've removed *breathed his last* and inserted the alternate reading found in the footnote, *gave up his Spirit.*]

The (old) Mennonite church that I grew up in was deeply suspicious of the broader world. To keep North American society away, the church of my childhood tried to erect visible markers of difference. Women were to wear prayer coverings. Men were to dress plainly. Youth were to stay away from rock music because that would surely lead to illicit sex and illegal drugs. Everyone was to avoid jewelry. The list of forbidden things was long. Among people in the General Conference Mennonite Church things were a little different, but for us (old) Mennonites it was a big deal to keep the church pure by keeping the world at arm's length.

When I was a teenager and began to read church history and theology, I was deeply moved by this impulse for Christians to extract themselves from worldly temptations. Well into young adulthood, I continued to think that the world was mostly going to hell, that people would only find God in the church, and that followers of Jesus should do everything in their power to separate themselves from the world's wild and wicked ways.

In the last three decades I've changed my mind. Yes, I still think there is great sin and evil in the world—but from my work as a pastor I also know the church is definitely not the pure and unspotted bride of Christ we might like to think it is. The church is capable of great sin and evil. I no longer picture the church as something which withdraws into a safe castle, raises the drawbridge, and fends off all that wickedness going on outside the castle walls.

Nor do I think any longer that the world is godless. Instead, I now see that God is as deeply involved with the world as with the church. I came to this conclusion simply by reading scripture. The Bible shows that God's activity is not limited to Israel, God's chosen people; or to the church, God's created people. Hebrew prophets like Amos, Jeremiah, Jonah, Nahum, Daniel, and others perceived God working in the rough and tumble of international politics. These prophets knew God can just as easily work in Egypt or Assyria or Babylonia as in Israel.

An astonishing passage that illustrates this is Isaiah 44:28-45:13, where the prophet declares that Cyrus the Great, the founding king of Persia (r. 550-529 B.C.E.), is God's "anointed" to be an instrument of God's purposes (45:1,4). Even though Cyrus neither worshiped Yahweh nor knew he was acting on behalf of Yahweh, Isaiah insists it doesn't matter. God can use Cyrus without Cyrus knowing anything about it (45:4-5). This is a bit like saying God can work through rulers of Islamic or Buddhist nations just as easily as through rulers of so-called "Christian" nations. The claim verges on being scandalous.

Another astonishing and rarely preached text is Matthew 27:50-54, where "Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last" (v. 50, NRSV). In a footnote the NRSV translators point out that you can also translate the Greek as "gave up his spirit" (i.e., "Jesus cried again with a loud voice and gave up his spirit.") This alternate translation opens up a very different meaning.

Think back for a moment to the early part of Jesus' ministry. When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, Matthew says the Holy Spirit swooped down from heaven like a dove and "alighted" on him (3:16). And in Matthew's story, that's where the Spirit stays throughout the ministry of Jesus. For as long as Jesus lives, the Spirit works collaboratively with Jesus. The Spirit provides Jesus with energy, passion, power, and wisdom for ministry. While Jesus lives, the Spirit works in the world through him. But now in the moments before he dies, Jesus releases the Holy Spirit. Since their earthly collaboration in this form is over, the Spirit and Jesus part company.

So where does the Holy Spirit go? It's a fairly crucial question. When Jesus relinquishes the Spirit, where does the Spirit go?

You might think the answer is obvious. You might suppose the Holy Spirit falls on the disciples at Pentecost and has remained there with the church ever since. So duh, the Holy Spirit is now in the church.

Not so fast. It's true, of course, that the Spirit is in the church. But remember the story about the Spirit coming to the church at Pentecost is from Acts, written by Luke. This, however, is Matthew. Pentecost as we usually think of it comes from the story of Luke. We should not impose things from Luke onto Matthew. The two are distinctively different gospels, each with slightly different theologies. Let us respect Matthew's own voice, his own way of telling the story.

Nowhere does Matthew say that after Jesus dies the Holy Spirit enters the disciples, or even re-enters the risen Jesus. Therefore if the Spirit is not in Jesus and not in the disciples, where is it? Once Jesus releases the Spirit and dies, where does the Spirit go, according to Matthew?

For Matthew there is only one answer: the Holy Spirit is now loosed upon this world. And once loosed upon this world, the Spirit immediately causes wonderful things to happen. The curtain in the temple splits; the earth shakes; rocks shatter; tombs spring open so that dead people come back to life and, a few days later, start walking around Jerusalem. Then, wonder of wonders, a crusty, hard-bitten Roman army officer confesses faith (Matt. 27:51-54). These events happen because the Spirit that was in Jesus now roams the world. In a sense, Matthew's "Pentecost" is the unleashing of the Spirit so it can roam throughout the world.

Think about what this means. As far as Matthew is concerned, the Holy Spirit is even today out and about in the world, swirling around the globe, doing all sorts of fabulous and amazing things even if we don't see them. In the theology of Matthew, the Spirit has no limits. It goes wherever it wants and does whatever it wants. We in the church cannot control or manage the Spirit. For Matthew, the Holy Spirit's home is the whole earth. That includes the church, of course, but the earth is primary. The Holy Spirit has the prerogative to engage everyone and everything the world contains.

The Holy Spirit is not just at church schools like Bethany, but also at public

schools like Goshen and Elkhart and WaNee. The Spirit works not just in Goshen's Mennonite churches, and not even just in the Lutheran and Presbyterian and Baptist churches, but also in the courts, the city council, and the mayor's office.

More broadly, the blessed Holy Spirit is also up to things at Ford Motor Company, Microsoft Corporation, PricewaterhouseCoopers, and Royal Dutch Shell. The Spirit breezes through the governments of Sudan, Russia, Vietnam, Laos, Colombia, Kenya, Bolivia, and South Africa. Maybe none of these corporations or governments realize that the Holy Spirit is pulsing through them. But no matter. If God can work through Cyrus the Great, then God also work through Toyota.

This doesn't mean the Holy Spirit is responsible for everything that happens in the world. We human beings are still free to thwart the purposes of the Spirit, and we have a pronounced knack for doing so quite regularly. Nonetheless, the Spirit is constantly looking for openings to do God's work everywhere in the world, scheming how to move events toward justice, peace, and righteousness. The Spirit is inexhaustibly inventive.

This puts the mission of the church in a radically different light. If the Holy Spirit is already loosed upon the world, then our mission cannot be to a godless world for the simple reason that God is already there in the world. No matter where we go—the Amazon rainforest, the streets of Harlem, or the halls of the Kremlin—the Spirit has already arrived ahead of us. In all these places, and indeed in every place, the Spirit already has something afoot.

If this is so, then we might consider five points about our missional stance vis-à-vis the world.

First, the church doesn't save the world. It's not our job to save the world. It's God who saves the world, working by the Spirit. The most we can do is to cooperate with the saving work which the Spirit is already doing.

Second, our first step in mission is to watch and listen for signs of the Spirit. When we meet people who profess little to no faith, our first task is to spot how the Holy Spirit, perhaps unknown to them, is already working in and around their lives. When we enter an organization that's not Christian, we do well to notice what the Spirit is already doing

in that organization. When we move to another location, we want to be on the lookout for what God has been doing in the years before we arrived.

Third, once we have a sense for how the Spirit has been working, our next step is to join with those Spirit-led efforts. Our missionary work is to cooperate with the Spirit, keeping our ears and eyes open for new directions the Spirit may be taking. We build on what the Holy Spirit has already started.

Fourth, these realizations make us profoundly humble. In the face of ongoing sin and evil in the world, we acknowledge that the Spirit is quite capable of advancing God's rule of peace, justice, and mercy without any involvement from the church. The church is just one of God's tools in the world, but not the only one. It is theoretically and theologically possible for the Holy Spirit to work through the executive, legislative, and judicial aspects of government, or through broad social movements, to achieve God's saving purposes in the world. This suggests that we in the church might want to wear an attitude of humility, knowing that the Spirit is doing crucial mission work without us.

Fifth, we can also be hugely grateful that the cause of peace, justice, and mercy does not depend solely on us. The Holy Spirit, loosed upon the world until the end of time (cf. 28:18-20), is also hard at work, inspiring, shaping, influencing, and empowering! Thanks be to God.