

Nothing so overwhelms a person who feels called to ministry as the specter of the ordination process. Kristie Grimaud, who worked as our Family Ministries Coordinator here at St. Paul's up until last December, just passed her interview with our District level Committee on Ministry. (I happen to serve on this Committee and she did an exceptional job.) Even as Kristie is serving as a 'local pastor' of the Chapel of the Hills UMC in Descanso, she still needs to pass extensive written and oral examinations for with our Conference Board of Ordained Ministry.

In the UMC, it does happen that a person who feels called to ministry can go all the way through seminary and never be approved by our Board of Ordained Ministry. We who are ordained have taken that risk, of going through every step of the process, including a costly seminary education, with that possibility in mind: that we may not be ordained.

Some ask, "If a person feels the Holy Spirit's nudge to ministry, what business does the institutional church (or local church) have judging the validity of that call? That's one reason people sometimes ordain themselves and set up store-front ministries. (I've sometimes imagined ordaining myself the 'Apostle Robb' and then gathering only those people who already think and practice their Christian faith in the ways I do!) You may take some comfort that one candidate rejected for ordination in the UMC was Jim Jones, the infamous cult leader of the People's Temple whose followers ended their lives in a mass suicide in 1978.

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Jim Jones notwithstanding, discerning the call and work of the Holy Spirit is no easy task. There's a story of a farmer who went into his corn field to inspect his crops. He had a sudden vision of a stone tablet descending from heaven. Inscribed on the tablet were two letters: "P. C." Right then and there he knew he was called to preach Christ, so instead of harvesting his corn, he rushed off to seminary. To the Dean of the seminary he explained his vision; how he was out in his corn field and had a vision of tablets from heaven inscribed with the letters: "P. C." He told the Dean of this as proof that he was divinely called to "Preach Christ." The Dean then asked the farmer, "How do you know that 'P. C.' was not God summoning you to pick corn?"

That illustration reveals an important truth, that the movement of the Spirit is neither easily discernable, nor always holy. As theologian Frederick Buechner notes, "We can be as easily caught up in the spirit of

a football game, a political rally, or a lynch mob," none of which is particularly holy. And even at church, religious fervor is not necessarily an indicator of the true movement of the Spirit.

This dilemma extends far beyond the ordination process. How do we know if the Holy Spirit is calling any of us to a particular ministry in this congregation; say as a Sunday School Teacher or mission trip leader? How do we discern if our congregation is being called to this or that ministry – from hosting a food program to running a building campaign? How do we know if the Holy Spirit is calling us to open our doors to the homeless or to support wounded vets or to start a community recycling program?

Questions like these invite us to pay sustained attention to the third facet of the Triune God: The Holy Spirit. And you may have already noted; where the Apostles Creed talks about God as the "maker of heaven and earth" and then goes into detail about Jesus our Christ, we then come to the single, almost feeble, line: "I believe in the Holy Spirit." Perhaps that is as it should be; the Holy Spirit should be as hard to pin down as it was to keep Jesus nailed to a cross. But no matter how elusive — the Holy Spirit is God's gift to the church. Without the Pentecost gift of the Holy Spirit, as described in Acts 2, there would be no church. We are truly nothing without it! And so as one pastor points out, the Holy Spirit is 'not optional equipment' for we who affirm the presence and work of the Holy Spirit.

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What is really needed is for us to develop our capacity to discern and heed the stirrings of the Spirit. A few years ago the UM denomination sought to be more intentional about heeding the movement of the Holy Spirit by minting a new slogan: "Open Hearts. Hope Minds. Open Doors." When I had a chance to speak with the director for this project, he said that one reason for the slogan was to encourage UM congregations to embrace our historical focus on the dynamic movement of the Holy Spirit. Our denomination's symbol is a cross and flame. If you can bring that image to your mind, you'll recall that the flame – which represents the Holy Spirit – is divided, like the flames over the heads of the disciples on the day of Pentecost. We are, in a very real sense, a Pentecostal church!

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So how does this idea and ideal of open-ness connect to our Church's traditional emphasis on the work of

the Holy Spirit? Let me highlight two ways scripture points us in this direction.

First, scripture reminds us that the Holy Spirit is ever and always the impetus of our shared ministry. You can't read the passage in Acts without seeing very clearly that it was the Spirit – not the apostles – generating the ministry of the church. Too easily we've bought into the notion "that the life of the church is dependent on us - our enthusiasm, our involvement, our activities, our beliefs and our volunteerism." One theologian says, "When the life of the church is thought to be 'our' responsibility; when people become concerned with 'keeping the church alive', and 'giving it a future', this can almost always be taken as a sign of the loss of any real sense of the Holy Spirit's presence."

When we assume that the church is "ours" and not God's, we fasten our spiritual doors against invasions of the Holy Spirit. So, an 'open door' policy goes beyond offering a hospitable welcome to guests of our church; our doors are also open to the Holy Spirit, which may crash down like a violent blowing wind to mess up our neatly coiffed hair and our sincerely held beliefs. At such times, like the apostles, we may utter words we don't even comprehend; words about God that we can't imagine having said just two minutes earlier.

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Second, scripture reveals that the Holy Spirit enables our ministry for Christ no matter our individual differences and limitations. You can't read the gospels without discovering that the disciples were not a like-minded lot. They held very different religious beliefs and had very different political motivations. And evidence of rancor among the apostles, and the churches, is pervasive in other New Testament writings. But somehow, through God's grace, the Spirit opens a space between us where we would otherwise be closed to one another. (Which is one reason we should not just be at a church where everyone agrees with one another!)

For me, it has been a joy to be your pastor at St. Paul's for the last 14 months. I've visited with many of you one-on-one, and we've had almost 300 of you into our parsonage home for lasagna dinners and ice cream socials. I've learned that some of you are very conservative, some very progressive; some of you grew up Lutheran, some Presbyterian, some Catholic, and at least two of you grew up Methodist. Some of you are Chargers fans, some of you are ex-Chargers fans. And yet, there is an open-ness, where I see how

the Holy Spirit has created a space to energize our common ministry.

Along that line, I'd point out a mistaken belief that our faith should lead us to a uniformity of beliefs. The reality is that such rigidity - insisting upon uniformity of belief, is what most characterizes a cult ... like the People's Temple. By contrast, a sure sign of the Holy Spirit's presence, is that we have been brought together to witness to God because we speak in different 'tongues' and yet offer authentic and truthful testimony to Christ. Friends, if diversity of views really threatened the existence of the church, we'd not have made it past the first 200 years. There is a phrase that has often been mis-attributed, that reflects the spirit of Methodism, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials liberty; *in all things, charity.*"

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Some years ago I learned that the word "conspire" means to breathe together. So, everybody, take a deep breath... We've just participated in a conspiracy. I hope we continue to be engaged in conspiracies of openness. Open to God and to one another through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Today I want to invite you to pray with me. Hold out your hands as you feel most comfortable, in your lap or up higher, and I will pray some words and I will leave some space for you to repeat the words I say silently: "Come Holy Spirit, I need you/ Breath of God,/ fill me wholly and completely./ Form and shape me /as the person you want me to be./ Lead me to do what you want me to do. /Empower me and use me;/ speak to me and through me./ Produce your fruit in my life./ Help me to listen to your voice above all other voices./ Come, Holy Spirit, I need you./ In Jesus' name. Amen."

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Perhaps, as we prayed, you felt nothing in particular. Perhaps, as we prayed, you felt immersed in God's grace. Perhaps, as you prayed, you felt the Holy Spirit leading you to give yourself more fully to Christ, or perhaps authentically for the first time. If you feel led to connect with me about giving your life to Christ more fully (or for the first time,) I invite you to let me know so I can follow up with you.