

Seeking Spirit

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

July 9, 2023 Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

*Genesis 1:1-2; 2:7; Proverbs 8; Psalm 139:7-13; Isaiah 61:1-4; Matthew 11:28-30;
John 7:37-39*

Welcome: Good morning, and welcome to the United Church of Strafford on this Sixth Sunday after Pentecost and last Sunday before our sabbatical time begins with the theme of Seeking Spirit. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online, and welcome back to Lisa Willems, our organist and choir director today!

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We give thanks for the opportunity to share in the bounty of this place and to protect it in the spirit of indigenous wisdom that sees all life and the land itself as gifts of the Spirit.

The Fulfilling Our Vision committee met recently about the Native American reparations fund that we voted to establish at our last Annual Meeting.

We saw again how beautifully the Spirit moves through us when we put our hearts and minds together as one. The Spirit gave the spark of this idea to Herbert Goertz, and at the recent meeting more sparks were flying, each of us contributing our questions or considerations or experience.

To me, it's a miracle of the Spirit how often we come here needing the very gifts we find waiting for us, in meetings or in worship. It is important that we recognize this as the same force that sparked the first living cell into being and sparked every step of evolution to bring us to where we are today.

It's important that we recognize that this Spirit of life is not done trying to shape the earth into a realm of harmony and oneness and it created us to help do that.

It's important that we see that everything we do here can be in the service of that Spirit, so please again today reach out and greet those around you, extending your care and support especially to those you know least well, because the Spirit knows that person, and the Spirit's love wants to flow through you to them.

Call to Worship: In my seventh-grade anatomy and physiology class I learned to trace the flow of blood through the human body. We can trace the Spirit's flow through human history, as well.

We can hear the Spirit speaking as Wisdom in the book of Proverbs three thousand years ago, we can see it guiding and empowering the life of Jesus a thousand years later, who described the Spirit as the flow of a living spring rising from our depths.

We can see it in the 20th Century comforting the gospel musician Thomas Dorsey after the death in childbirth of his beloved wife and baby. We see it move him to his piano and we hear the song Precious Lord, Take My Hand pouring out of his grief.

We can trace how Dorsey's gift from the Spirit flowed into the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as Precious Lord comforted and empowered him to rise from discouraged exhaustion, renewed by the Spirit again and again.

Now in our own time of global crisis and personal need, let us open to the flow of the Spirit here today, and worship it with thanks and praise.

Children's Time: In the CS Lewis Narnia book, *The Silver Chair*, Eustace Scrubb and Jill Pole are fleeing a gang of bullies at an English boarding school. Eustace has been in Narnia before, and suggests to Jill that they call upon the lion Aslan, the Christ figure in Narnia, to help them. Miraculously, a door opens into Narnia.

Eustace and Jill get separated, but Jill meets Aslan who starts to tell her why he called them there. Jill says you must mean someone else, because we called you.

Aslan says, you would not have called to me if I were not first calling you.

The theme of our next four months is Seeking Spirit, and it can be read two ways. The Spirit we are seeking is a seeking spirit. We would not think to seek it if it were not already seeking us.

One of the most beautiful passages in the Bible says, "We love because God first loved us." This is important to understand. The Spirit we are talking about is the force that created life on earth and gave our parents their life and then gave us ours.

Love is what creates and nurtures life, love of another being or the love of life that flows through every being. We love because that Spirit of love and life first loved us through the hearts of our parents, and when we reach times in our life when we lose our ability to love, we can count

on the Spirit moving through friends or through nature or through a book or dream—somehow that Spirit will seek to reach us with its love to bring our love back.

So the question is, why—why does the Spirit seek us, why does it comfort or guide or give us strength, why does it move us to love—what does it want to accomplish through us in our time and place?

This is what we are alive to discover: what is our role in the evolution of the Spirit’s life on earth?

We need to learn to listen deeply in our heart in order to gain a sense of this, and the best tool we have is, of course...to pray. Let us say together the new version of the Lord’s Prayer and let the attitude of prayer open our hearts to feel the Spirit seeking us. Let us pray....

Seeking Spirit

“Seeking Spirit” is the Church Council’s brilliant theme for this sabbatical time. Among other things, it acknowledges that we are on a journey that has an unknown path and uncertain destination. The Council and I each have our plans, but the Spirit is the ultimate guide and driver of our experience, as well as our goal, as the Spirit was for Jesus in the wilderness.

My hope in this sermon is to set the context for our sabbatical journeys, and to reflect on traditional wisdom that may be helpful. People have been seeking Spirit forever, sensing it in nature and in their own and other hearts and minds. They have left records of what practices proved fruitful and what they found.

The most important practice is what we are about to do, create what the Rabbi Abraham Heschel called “a sanctuary in time” that we enter seeking Spirit.

Heschel was talking about the sabbath as a sanctuary in time. The word sabbatical comes from sabbath. The sabbath day is set aside for two purposes in the Bible: first, to rest from work; and second, to remember who created us, to whom our life belongs. It is a day to turn away from materialism and seek the Spirit within and around us in this material world. The Bible commands us to take a sabbath year, as well as a sabbath day—a whole year of rest and seeking and trusting in the Spirit.

The sabbath is one of the first of the Ten Commandments because everything else in our ethics depends on what the sabbath encourages: recognizing our true relationship of oneness with

the Spirit and through it our oneness with all creation as the neighbor we are to love as our self. This expanded vision, or metanoia, can come when we give time, effort and intention to seeking Spirit.

Last week I quoted the 20th Century Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, who said that what we each are asked to do by the Spirit does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling us to be something we are not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling us to be the person the Spirit created us to be.

Seeking Spirit is generally the best thing we can do, whatever our circumstances, but over the past several thousand years people have found that there are specific gifts that the Spirit can give us to meet particular needs.

We heard many of them in the series of scripture passages we read.

In Genesis we see the creative power of the Spirit, and hear affirmed that it is present in every human and all creation. It brings life into being and nurtures it and lives through it. The Spirit is our source of inspired creativity and renewed or resurrected life.

In Psalm 139 we hear the Spirit’s constant presence affirmed. No night can overcome its light within and around us. We may feel lost or abandoned, but we always have this friend with us, with all its gifts.

In Proverbs we hear the Spirit speaking in a female voice as wisdom and understanding personified. The Spirit teaches the right and sacred way through any situation—a path of justice, abundant life and grace. The Spirit is eager to guide us when we are unsure of ourselves.

In Isaiah we get a sense of the Spirit’s gift of power to serve the cause of mercy, justice and peace. We hear that the Spirit’s goal is to build the ideal human society through the gifts and strength it gives us. It calls us to play our part in its ever-flowing social movement.

Jesus cries out in the Gospel of John that the Spirit is like a stream of living water that wells up from within us. We can drink of that water by opening to it in faith. We can be the source of living water for others if the Spirit is flowing out of us as it did out of Jesus. We may dry up, we may thirst, we may feel hopeless, but if we keep seeking we will find that the source is always within and around us.

Finally, in the Matthew passage at the top of the Order of Worship, we hear of the comfort that the Spirit gives, and the help carrying our burdens. The Spirit that sparked life built the need

for rest into every cell of every being—even single cell organisms. The Spirit also created us to love comfort, and putting all our trust in the Spirit’s higher power is the greatest comfort we can have.

Jesus faced hard, heavy times, as do all who follow the Spirit down paths of rightness and justice, because those paths inevitably confront wrongness and injustice. But Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek,” and one of the reasons the meek are blessed is that they rely on the Spirit’s power and wisdom, not their own, and they take refuge in the Spirit’s comfort and rest.

Following the Spirit means not knowing where our path will lead. Surprise is one of the gifts of sabbaths and sabbaticals. The Spirit surprised Jesus by driving him into the wilderness and leading him into temptations and trials and then bringing him out full of spiritual wisdom and power.

We can trust that the Spirit has a purpose for us, wherever our paths may lead. The Spirit has evolved life, has raised new life out of death, has inspired art and philosophy and movements for liberation and democracy. The Spirit has expanded human consciousness through a progressive series of enlightenments over millennia, and we can trust that it is not done yet.

We may feel we are walking lost and alone at times, but we can be sure that if we seek and open ourselves to the Spirit it will flow through us to continue its work building oneness and beloved community.

Think of the most Spirit-filled people you have known. I think of my mother, and a chaplain who taught me in school, and a Sufi musician, and one of the monks who evolved Centering Prayer. The thing they all have in common is that they made room for the Spirit in their hearts, minds and daily lives.

Self-emptying, or kenosis, is the essential first step on the spiritual path, letting go of material cares and concerns. The most effective tool for kenosis is contemplative practice of some kind, anything that allows you simply to be and enter the flow of the Spirit through mindfulness or centering prayer or meditation. Let us practice now, praying in silence, opening, listening, waiting, making ourselves completely available to the Spirit... Amen.

The hymn we are about to sing was a request from Kay Plunkett for words that she could sing all year round set to the tune of “In the Bleak Midwinter.” It is for all of us as we set out seeking Spirit.

I Will Give You Comfort (Spirit Song) by Thomas Cary Kinder, 2023
tune: CRANHAM (In the Bleak Midwinter)

I will give you comfort,
Walking lost, alone.
From your tomb's cold shadows,
I roll back the stone.
My light no night overcomes,
In you, all around,
In fear, pain or trouble,
My love found.

I will give you guidance,
Words through book or friend,
Signs I leave in nature,
Angel dreams I send,
Intuition, wisdom, sight,
Living streams that flow:
Pray and wait in silence.
You will know.

I will give you power
For the good you seek.
In the strife with evil,
Blessed are the meek.
I created you to help
Bring love's realm to birth.
I give strength for justice,
Peace on earth.

What gifts can I give you
For this day you face?
Ask and I will answer.
Open wide to grace:
Spirit of the Universe,
Flowing deep inside,
Comforter, Love's Power,
Friend and Guide.

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

A fox lay down next to her mate.
They looked at each other,
touched noses.