

Why Walk When We Can Fly?

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Acts 19:1-7

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“While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ They answered, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’”

Acts 19:1-2

There’s an old hymn I’ve been thinking a lot about this week. Strangely, it’s a hymn I can’t remember ever including in a worship service before today: “Lord, I Want to be a Christian.”

It’s always seemed a little odd to me for Christians to tell God they want to be Christian. But, then, when I reflected on this passage from The Acts of the Apostles, telling the story of Paul meeting the “disciples” (notice, “disciples”) who lived in Ephesus who had never heard of the Holy Spirit, something clicked into place, and I thought to myself, maybe this old hymn understands that struggle of the soul that many of us have felt between *adhering to Christianity as a religion* and *living the faith of Jesus*.

I think I’ve mentioned in some context or the other the philosopher William James who focused his pragmatic approach to life on the subject of religion. James decided that looking at official creeds and confessional standards of the various religions (in other words, the belief statements they espouse) is unhelpful in determining their truth. Rather, thought James, we should look at their fruit.

Does a faith produce the quality of life in its adherents that it advocates?

If it does, it’s telling the truth. If it doesn’t, it has veracity problems. It has, in fact, existential problems, a problem with real life.

So, back to St. Paul: we are told in the Book of Acts, that Paul, a rabbi who had become chief missionary to the gentiles, came to Ephesus, and met “disciples” already living there. He asked them if they had received the Holy Spirit. And they answered with a resounding, “Huh? Whatdoyamean? We’ve never even heard of the Holy Spirit?”

Then Paul asked them, “Who baptized you?” And they answered, “John the Baptist!” When it comes to bona fides that’s pretty darn good.

In other words, they were baptized in the Jordan River by the same person as Jesus himself. And Paul explained to them, “John’s baptism was all about repentance,” but as important as that is, it isn’t the same as entering into that full life and love which Jesus shares with us through his own Spirit.

This story describes the difference between:

a religion to which we adhere and which even causes us to embrace repentance, to turn away from those things that hurt us or through which we may harm others, and

a life that rises up within us, a life that we know we don't simply produce and can't possibly sustain by our own power, a life that depends on God to keep kindling within us.

If there's any struggle of the soul that I can personally identify with, it is this one.

Why is it that even when I know better, I keep tripping over the same old habits of anger, feelings of resentment? Why, although I know better, do I automatically react with the desire for revenge when I'm wronged? Why do I keep believing that somehow violence can ever result in anything but more violence? How can I possibly imagine that deceit can magically result in truth, or that crooked means can ever deliver good ends? I know better.

And, yet, if someone slaps me on one cheek, I have been more likely than not to make them pay for it. And, yet, I know that all this results in is a brief hollow victory on my part, and the confirmation in the heart of my adversary that next time they'd better slap a lot harder.

No matter how many times I've repented. No matter how much regret I carry. No matter how ashamed I have been after humiliating someone, I nevertheless believed that my actions were if not ideal, if not really good, *at least necessary*. But what I find myself yearning for is not the external standard that keeps encouraging me to do better, but some living factor inside me that empowers and enthralls me to be the person I want to be.

"Have you received the Holy Spirit?" asked Paul.

"Received the Holy Spirit? We don't even know what you're talking about?" replied the disciples at Ephesus.

When I set out to teach my first seminary course in theology, I followed the Apostles Creed one clause after another from one end to the other of the creed, and the toughest phrase for me was "I believe in the Holy Spirit." I remember telling Debbie how hard it was to write about the Holy Spirit.

She said that talking about the Holy Spirit reminded her of a problem she saw in a lunchroom at an elementary school where she'd once taught. The children in that school were given only one eating utensil no matter what their meal was. No matter what the children had to eat, they only had forks. So the worst day of the week was the day the cafeteria served Jell-O. All the lunchroom ladies griped about the mess the children made every time they served Jell-O. But the teachers and probably many of the children understood: you just can't eat Jell-O with a fork.

That's how I felt when I tried to speak to seminarians on the subject of the Holy Spirit. There's no lack of biblical texts on God as Spirit. There's drama and poetry all through the Bible related to the Spirit. In the Old Testament, the Spirit is God the Creator brooding over the face of the deep. The Spirit appears as a desert wind (In Hebrew, "RUACH") rushing through dusty canyons bringing life to dry skeletons, or a breath making a living man out of mud, or breathing the Word of God into the heart of the prophets.

In the New Testament the Spirit is the one who moves Jesus. The Spirit is the animating power of his life, the healing touch in his ministry, the source of his words, the living factor within him that motivates and empowers him. And when Jesus departed, this same Spirit is promised to take up residence in and among those who trust the God revealed in the crucified Christ.

The Spirit is the very Godness of God, the eternally flowing Vitality and Love that God shares in Godself, and through whom God keeps creating the world and seeking to save the world from itself. Breath, wind, fire, love unseen, and life unseeable: there's just no theological utensil that can handle it. But the effects of the Spirit on human lives: that's visible, recognizable, knowable. And these effects have never ceased to make us uneasy, even if we are very religious.

Someone once said that the way of Jesus has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and largely left untried.* We've all heard it said many times.

There's never been a better summary of the thought of Soren Kierkegaard than that little saying.* Kierkegaard was the scourge of established and institutional Christendom in his native Denmark. His contention, simply put, was that Christianity had largely become unChristian in his nation. To make his point, Kierkegaard once told a story about a very religious gaggle of geese.

Every Sunday morning, the geese would waddle to their church building, sit in their pews, and listen as Reverend Goose told the sacred stories to them. Every Sunday morning they were inspired to hear how long, long ago there lived among them a goose who had lived the fullness of goose life, whose goosely existence was supercharged by the Spirit of the heavenly Goose. Defying all the usual expectations, risking his life, that goose long ago was so totally imbued with the life and love of the heavenly Goose that he took to the air and flew in perfect freedom, unafraid even of death.

And every Sunday after worship, the geese all waddled to their homes to eat dinner (*foie gras was strictly prohibited*), and to rest. And each Monday morning they returned to their conventional goose lives like all the other good respectable geese.

One Monday morning, however, there came a knock on the door of the manse. When the minister went to the door, there before him stood a goose he knew well from his congregation.

"I've just come by to thank you for your inspiring sermons," said the goose at the door. "I've decided to take to the air and fly."

"What?" said the Reverend Goose, "Fly? Are you crazy? You can't fly. Geese can't *really* fly? If you take to the air, you will crash. No. No. No. No. No. no. Go back home. Lie down until this feeling passes. Take a laxative (really, that's what Kierkegaard says). Preaching my sermons, I never intended for your life to really change."

"Well, it has," said the goose. And walking out the door, he flew away.

It will be no surprise to you to learn that it was Kierkegaard who prayed that God would empower us by his Spirit not only to admire Jesus but to follow him and resemble him.

Amen.

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- G. K. Chesterton is the source of the quote. But I didn't want to weigh down the sermon with yet another source name.
 - In his time Soren Kierkegaard was the most embarrassing man in Copenhagen, Denmark. As the blurb on the newest study of his life tells us, his quest was to answer the most basic question we can imagine: How can we live as human beings in the world? In the course of trying to answer this question, he tried to understand Christian faith as a spiritual force, a vital transforming force in the lives of people. He also mercilessly criticized institutionalized Christianity, which equated being Christian with citizenship, and Christianity's Sacrament of Baptism as a mere rite of passage in Danish society. Reading him today, it is hard to imagine, but he was so despised that children pelted him with rocks and called him names when he appeared on the sidewalk. He came to believe that his vocation, his calling, was to be the Socrates of Christianity, a gadfly that would keep stinging Christians in his native land until they realized that the sophisticated, polite religion they practiced bore only the most superficial similarities to the faith of Jesus Christ.