

Message: “Catholic Spirit”**Kerry Davidson shares this story about life:**

“Here in Liberia, most of life is lived outside of the four walls of the home. Daily tasks such as cooking, laundry, and washing dishes are done in the yard. When we moved to Liberia, we’d sit on our front porch and watch fights break out between neighbors. We witnessed everything from yelling to physical fights and even some more violent fights during which police were called.

I began to stand on our porch and pray for Jesus to bring peace to our neighbors, to mend relationships and transform hearts. The Holy Spirit moved in our community and we haven’t witnessed a fight since I started praying. There is no other explanation but God moving among us and bringing ... peace.”¹

The peace of Christ goes beyond our understanding. That’s because that kind of peace it isn’t just an absence of conflict. God’s peace comes from a spiritual place. The source of God’s peace is God’s love. When we’re connected by God’s love, our soul is nourished. We’re able to find peace.

I find it amazing the Holy Spirit has worked to give us this text at this time and at this place. There is so much going on in the world right now; we need peace. There is so much going on in our church right now; we need peace. There is so much going on in our families right now; we need peace. Come, Lord, give us peace.

The peace of Christ is a peace that guides, protects and nourishes us. It’s the way God’s Spirit helps us and makes us better. It’s also one of those things that can go-in-one-ear-and-out-the-other. You know what I mean? If we hear a message of peace, but then we go home or to work on Monday or a meeting at church and tear into someone, we aren’t really owning it. We’re saying “yes” and “no” to the Spirit and the way of peace. “Yes” means we’re happy to receive peace, but “no” means we aren’t ready to make peace. Paul calls that being “double-minded” or, in more direct terms, hypocritical. That’s not healthy for us or for

¹ <https://www.seedbed.com/6-stories-of-gods-holy-spirit-fresh-from-the-mission-field/>

anyone else. It’s not the way of unity. It’s certainly not the way to spiritual maturity and a full life.

I used a “churchy” word in the title of this message: catholic.

The term has very specific meaning and application. When we hear the word we think of the Roman Catholic Church. There’s a reason catholic is part of their name. The Greek word translated as catholic actually means “on the whole” or “in general.” A good, modern English translation is “all-embracing.”

Methodists seek to have a catholic spirit. Having a catholic spirit means to have a spirit that seeks to invite, connect and embrace all others. It isn’t about selfishness or brokenness, this position or that, this biblical interpretation or that one. We all struggle with that. When we embrace the Holy Spirit, we find the grace (& space) to step back, see the hurt and situation of another person, and to embrace them with love ... even when it hurts us to do so! Even when we disagree, love calls us to sacrifice for the good of others.

There’s a truth that’s rarely stated. God’s Spirit doesn’t battle with itself. The Spirit within you doesn’t battle with the Spirit within me or the Spirit within your neighbor or the Spirit within your enemy.

WE are the ones who battle! That’s our human spirit – our own pride, selfishness and greed on display, along with the influence of evil. The master of this Earth loves to lie to us.

A catholic Spirit is the heart that draws us together in Jesus – in love, even when we disagree and fight with one another. It’s a bond of life. It’s a heart that says we can have different opinions while loving the same Jesus and each other. Catholic spirit is the source of social holiness. We’re better together. God is present when we come together. God makes those times and places holy. When we gather together seeking the Lord, we’re reminded of our common spiritual bond. When we rely on God’s Spirit, we find harmony. We’re reminded that we are all spiritual beings made to be united with God’s all-embracing Spirit.

Our scripture readings for today show us two ways the Holy Spirit works in us. Elijah and Paul experienced and understood the peace that

comes when God’s Spirit is with us. But it wasn’t easy for either of them

Elijah was in the middle of a life-or-death fight with those who worshipped Baal (1 Kings 18). Most of the people living in Canaan were farmers, not shepherds, so Baal was most likely a fertility deity, often pictured as a man with the head and horns of a bull. Worshipers of Baal offered sacrifices, usually sheep or bulls. But they also sacrificed pigs. And during times of crisis, Baal followers sacrificed their children in fire, which God calls detestable (Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:9-10).

There were two evil rulers in northern Israel, King Ahab and his wife Jezebel (1 Kings 19). Ahab worked against Elijah and God. When he married Jezebel, who was raised worshipping Baal, things got worse. Jezebel didn’t accept YHWH. She led Ahab to build a temple to Baal in the middle of Samaria. The conflict was political and personal.

Elijah found himself in armed conflict and then on the run, afraid for his life. He fled to Beersheba, in southern Judah. Elijah then fled into the desert. He finally “found a lone broom bush and collapsed in it’s shade, wanting in the worst way to be done with it all – to just die.” Elijah said, “*Enough of this, God! Take my life – I’m ready to join my ancestors.*” Exhausted he fell asleep (1 Kings 19:3-5, MSG). Often, the best thing we can do when faced with conflict is to rest.

God wasn’t done with Elijah. God sent an angel who said, “*Get up and eat!*” To Elijah’s surprise, he found a loaf of freshly baked bread and a jug of water. He ate and went back to sleep. The angel of God (hint, hint) came back, woke him up again and said, “*Get up and eat some more – you’ve got a long journey ahead of you*” (vv5c-7). We need to take care of ourselves to be able to serve the Lord.

Elijah got up, ate and drank, and set out. He walked 40 days and 40 nights until he got to Mt. Horeb, the mountain of God. When he got there, he crawled into a cave and went to sleep. God was at work.

That’s when God’s word came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (vv8-9) Why are you here?

Elijah gave him his sob story ... on the run ... people have abandoned the covenant ... the places of worship are gone ... prophets killed ... I'm the only one left! (v10) He's worn out and done.

God knew what Elijah needed. God told Elijah, "*Go stand on the mountain before God. YHWH will pass by.*" You heard the rest of the passage earlier. God wasn't in the hurricane or the earthquake or the fire, but God was in the gentle and quiet whisper. (vv11-12)

When Elijah heard the quiet voice, he knew. Elijah covered his face, went to the mouth of the cave and stood there. The quiet voice asked, "*So Elijah, now tell me, what are you doing here?*" God was asking "Why are you running away?"

Elijah's answer, "I've been working my heart out for God, because people have abandoned your covenant, destroyed your places of worship and murdered your prophets. I'm the only one left and now they're trying to kill me" (vv11,12). He's worn out, disappointed, lost and alone

God said, "Go back to where you came." Then God gave Elijah instructions on what to do: bless a new leader, appoint a new spiritual advisor and recruit allies for the team vv15-18. God revealed that there were others who were ready to serve God. Elijah was never alone. God was always in control. On the way Elijah met his successor Elisha.

This story applies to us today. Many people feel like the church as they have known it is being stolen. Worship has changed. People don't respect the church or its leaders. Some voices have been silenced or lost. You've been doing battle with all your heart, trying to keep it all together. You're exhausted, spiritually hungry, unhappy with God and you feel alone.

God's voice speaks to us today, "What are you doing here?"
Why are you running away?

We need to rest, take nourishment and practice self-care. We need to go to a holy place. We need to be quiet and listen to God. We need to listen for the quiet and gentle voice. You see, God is sending us back. We have instructions. We need to bless new leaders, make those in the community our allies, listen to new prophets. We need to trust God. We can be assured that God is in control and will care for us.

There are many who are ready to serve God. Mostly likely, we don't know them or realize the gifts and skills of those among us! We need to be ready to bless each other and invite other people to use the gifts and experience God has given them, rather than running and hiding because we're afraid. God is in control. There are many opportunities during times of change.

Paul's letter to the church in Galatia is an example. It's a challenge to a people who have forgotten their faith. Rather than staying true to their first love, they've been led back into old ways, bad practices and prejudicial attitudes. Paul reminds them that *“rule-keeping doesn't have the power to save us. If it did, we certainly would have gotten it by now. The law serves as a tutor to escort us and keep us away from dangers and distractions, just like teachers at school who watch over children”* (Galatians 3:24, MSG).

Paul gets to the main point: *“But now you have arrived at your destination. By faith in Christ you are in direct relationship with God”* (v25). He goes on to tell us what adult faith looks like: *“In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female, [queer and straight]. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ”* (v28).

All are welcome in God's family. Grace is God's to give, not ours. Let's not run or hide in fear, but show love to others and do the good work for which God made and equipped us. That's the way to life.

John Wesley said, “Though we can't think alike, may we not love alike? May we be of one heart, even though we are not of one opinion? Without a doubt, we may. All children of God may unite, even with these smaller differences. And as we are, we can go to one another with love and good works”² (my modern English paraphrase).

Catholic spirit is one of the unique marks of our community of faith. It's one of the things that mark us as Methodists. It's why we strive to live with open hearts, open minds and open doors. We believe in the greater good. We do not pretend to tell others how to love or worship God. At the same time, we are open to new ways of experiencing and

² John Wesley, “Catholic Spirit”, sermon from 1872 (No. 44)

worshipping God together. That leads us to fresh and Spirit-filled expressions of God’s love we can’t imagine.

I invite you to trust God, embrace each other in love and hold onto others as our Methodist way of life. You’ll find it leads to the peace of Christ.

Let us pray ...

Almighty God, we are grateful for your love, grace and mercy. We sorely need all three. Forgive us, Lord, for not loving people who are different from us. Show us mercy when we ignore people who have different opinions. Give us the courage and strength to put other people first, for when we do so, we are seeking to be true followers and peacemakers. And, by so doing, we truly become your children. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

1 Kings 19:1-15a (CEB)

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, how he had killed all Baal’s prophets with the sword. Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah with this message: “May the gods do whatever they want to me if by this time tomorrow I haven’t made your life like the life of one of them.”

Elijah was terrified. He got up and ran for his life. He arrived at Beer-sheba in Judah and left his assistant there. He himself went farther on into the desert a day’s journey. He finally sat down under a solitary broom bush. He longed for his own death: “It’s more than enough, LORD! Take my life because I’m no better than my ancestors.” He lay down and slept under the solitary broom bush.

Then suddenly a messenger tapped him and said to him, “Get up! Eat something!” Elijah opened his eyes and saw flatbread baked on glowing coals and a jar of water right by his head. He ate and drank, and then went back to sleep. The LORD’s messenger returned a second time and tapped him. “Get up!” the messenger said. “Eat something, because you have a difficult road ahead of you.” Elijah got up, ate and drank, and went refreshed by that food for forty days and nights until he arrived at Horeb, God’s mountain. There he went into a cave and spent the night.

The LORD’s word came to him and said, “Why are you here, Elijah?”

Elijah replied, “I’ve been very passionate for the LORD God of heavenly forces because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars, and they have murdered your prophets with the sword. I’m the only one left, and now they want to take my life too!”

The LORD said, “Go out and stand at the mountain before the LORD. The LORD is passing by.” A very strong wind tore through the mountains and broke apart the stones before the LORD. But the LORD wasn’t in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake. But the LORD wasn’t in the earthquake. After the earthquake, there was a fire. But the LORD wasn’t in the fire. After the fire, there was a sound. Thin. Quiet. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his coat. He went out and stood at the cave’s entrance. A voice came to him and said, “Why are you here, Elijah?”

He said, “I’ve been very passionate for the LORD God of heavenly forces because the Israelites have abandoned your covenant. They have torn down your altars, and they have murdered your prophets with the sword. I’m the only one left, and now they want to take my life too.”

The LORD said to him, “Go back through the desert to Damascus and anoint Hazael as king of Aram.

Galatians 3:23-29 (CEB)

Before faith came, we were guarded under the Law, locked up until faith that was coming would be revealed, so that the Law became our custodian until Christ so that we might be made righteous by faith.

But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian.

You are all God’s children through faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Now if you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise.