

Psalm 104:24-34 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²⁴O LORD, how manifold are your works!

In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.

²⁵Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great.

²⁶There go the ships,
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

²⁷These all look to you
to give them their food in due season;

²⁸when you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

²⁹When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.

³⁰When you send forth your spirit,^[a] they are created;
and you renew the face of the ground.

³¹May the glory of the LORD endure forever;
may the LORD rejoice in his works—

³²who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke.

³³I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.

³⁴May my meditation be pleasing to him,
for I rejoice in the LORD.

Romans 8:22-27 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now;²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.²⁴ For in ^[a] hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes ^[b] for what is seen? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes ^[c] with sighs too deep for words.²⁷ And God, ^[d] who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit ^[e] intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ^[f]

Proverbs 16:2-3 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

² All one's ways may be pure in one's own eyes,
but the LORD weighs the spirit.

³ Commit your work to the LORD,
and your plans will be established

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Psalm 104:24-34; Romans 8:22-27; Proverbs 16:2-3

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There are actions, and then there are right actions, and then there are actions that may look like right actions, but don't have the right spirit. This sorting out of what the Spirit would have us do, my friends, is advanced Christianity, the graduate level course. It's not progressive Christianity, nor is it "by the book" Christianity, but it is an exploration of the expectations Christ really had in mind for his followers that will make your brain hurt and your heart ache for starters.

So, why even bring it up? Couldn't we just be satisfied with simple Christianity, a kind of light and reasonable religious commitment that doesn't require all that much of us? Couldn't we "enjoy" our long weekend and forget about the groaning of creation for just a few days? Why can't we be like the creeping things and the swimming things that get their food in due season and worry about little else? The grill is all ready to be fired up this afternoon, and the burgers and potato salad have been provided by the open hand of God. So c'mon Kerra, preach us the word that makes us feel like "good" people, and let us go on our merry way!

But I can't let it go because it is Pentecost Sunday, the Sunday in which we are scandalized by the coming of the Spirit into the world. It is preposterous to believe that God is still acting, still moving, still pushing us to go above and beyond our own animal instincts to grasp for a life that is richer and fuller than just the comfort of receiving our own next meal. Because the Spirit moves, we are moved. The world will not stay the same. Neither Christian progressives, nor Biblical literalists are happy with this news, and there's a good reason for that. Aligning ourselves with the Spirit not only changes the world, it primarily and dramatically changes each of us. And who exactly wants to be changed?

Now when the Spirit moved at Pentecost and all those gathered around understood in their own language and 3,000 were converted and baptized, we can look at that story and say that the Spirit's work was obvious. That story was recorded precisely to demonstrate the magnitude of the Spirit's power. Holiness was let loose on that crowd through the apostles' powerful preaching, and something else they could not quite define. Our stories of the Spirit's work may be somewhat less dramatic, but nevertheless, whenever the Spirit is said to truly be at work, there will be something mighty going on.

Let 's get down to figuring out just how we go "from drinking milk to eating meat" in our faith as Paul might say. In baby Christianity, the 101 course, there are important things to be learned. We learn the rules of our faith, and they sound a lot like Kindergarten guidelines. Don't punch or bite. Use kind words. Be a friend. Welcome the new kid. Don't take someone else's lunch money. Tell the truth. Sometimes adults would do well to remember their baby Christianity. It's about kindness, and patience, and learning right actions from merely self-preserving actions. It's not a stretch to say that Christianity is about love, not hate – even though we are fallible people and sometimes are known for the opposite. Getting the mother's milk of our faith right is important. It's about relationships really. It starts with the people we are closest to and know the best, and those who get good at this stage of faith are diligent in their relationships with everyone they meet. Kindness really does go a long, long way to aligning ourselves with the Spirit's desires for the world.

But there comes a point where that isn't quite enough. Those right actions can become rigid actions that favor the in-group over the designated out-group. Religion becomes about the purity of getting things right rather than affirming the generosity of our relationships. When that happens, hypocrisy rears its ugly head. Jesus was adamant about scouring the hypocrisy from his own religion (Judaism as you know, not Christianity just yet). He went so far in naming it that he raised the ire of

the high priests to deadly consequences. There's a diligence required in graduate level Christianity that has a nose for what doesn't "smell right" in our practices. We must not only be kind to those who are "like us" but learn how to offer kindness to those who are not "like us." Love our enemies, so to speak. The difficulty comes for the practitioner who truly wants to be kind when one's desire to help becomes unhelpful. Baby Christianity teaches us to be generous with our "things," but charitable giving can be something we do to soothe our own guilt rather than offer what we have as a gift to the world. Sometimes it makes us feel good to give without really assessing what's going on with our neighbors in need. We don't have to think about what got those neighbors into the situation in which they needed our assistance, or benefitted from getting food from our food pantry. What the Spirit wants to know, is, "Are our actions and our spirit in alignment?" Do we truly love the "other?"

All one's ways may be pure in one's own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit. How about that? We can't just "look good," God knows if our intentions are good, and if we are committed to the Lord, maybe, just maybe our plans will be established. Religion has always, always bungled this one. We start to lose our priorities and think that looking perfect is all we have to do. That's why we've had these constant reminders since proverbial wisdom had its start in the long, long, long time ago. Jesus is relatively recent history in that case, and he affirms the same sentiment - that our spirit's desire matters more than if we get everything "right" in the world's eyes. And when the Spirit is unleashed in the world, well, we either get with the program or we don't. And if we don't then we may think we're pure when we're really not.

I told you your brain may hurt and your heart may ache this morning. My brain hurts knowing that I'm going to get things wrong – even as a person who wants to be good. My motives aren't always innocent. I know without a doubt that I do a whole bunch of things that make my life

easier, but aren't really good for the rest of the world. I couldn't rid my house of all the plastic, even if I really tried. I still drive a car to work, 60 miles roundtrip, so I use plenty of gasoline – a commodity that has caused much strife in our world. I feel terribly guilty about the oil spills in the ocean, but I also know that my practices in life that call for easy containers and reliable transportation contribute to that very same carelessness that allows such spills to happen. I also enjoy plenty of other creature comforts that are imported from places that do terrible things to their workers. It kills me to know that I cannot save the planet, and I cannot wave a magic wand and create a just economy. I am just one person, and I feel absolutely helpless to solve those large scale messes that we humans have created. I don't have a solution to either, and even if I did, it feels as though the weight of greed that would stop me is more powerful than even a million people working together could bear. What can the Spirit do? What can my spirit participate in that would make a difference? I long to know. I want to change, maybe. Will I let the Spirit change me?

And the heartache is even worse than the brain freeze. The hurt in this world is incomprehensibly huge. Are we responsible for making a difference in it? I think we are. Our sacred text tells us so; our spiritual impulses tell us so. The Spirit is groaning for all of creation. The Spirit prays in us and through us when we cannot make sense of any of it. The prayers are “sighs too deep for words.” I get those sighs. In moments of prayer, I've prayed those sighs when nothing else will do. Maybe our call is to let our heart ache by inching ever closer to that pain. Will we allow ourselves to see it close up? We know that children living in Apple Garden Inn are experiencing something we can barely wrap our minds around. Do you have the heart to feel the injustices that perpetuate the need for cheap hotels that take advantage of poor people? I don't know if that particular one is a culprit – but I can tell you that the folks from Duncan Memorial got a little bit closer to look at the situation and found out that when a “guest” got to staying too long in some of these situations, the hotel would quit replenishing toilet paper in the room, and would charge for phone calls, and begin

to make it an even more uncomfortable situation so the family might have to leave. We want to care. In Baby Christianity, we learned that caring was something that we do, but in Graduate Christianity, we start to feel the pull of justice along with kindness. It's a great start, but perhaps it's not enough to be kind and send kids to camp for a safe option. Maybe we need to get to know and touch something awful and be moved by it. Will the Spirit give us that next push? Probably. The Spirit is pretty insistent in that way.

The prophets, like Micah, make it plain for us to understand. The tri-fold commission found there is to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. Some of those things we find harder than others. I tend to think that kindness precedes justice, and then our humble walking comes when we've run out of energy for the other two. We walk with God through this minefield of compassionate caring and seeking justice. We never run out of need. We never run out of greed. We never run out of heartbreak. Our work is never complete, but the Spirit, she does stuff to us and through us.

The Pentecost moment, the story we equate with that in the second chapter of Acts, has been relegated in our Christian narrative to be a story about how neat it is to grow the church. That growth was barely a blip in the power that story provides. That story shows us how God has given us the power and authority to bring about God's realm here on earth. It requires our participation. We must "show up" for class. The Spirit is preparing us for the hard, hard work of living together as equals and in peace. Will we ever get there? I don't know. The hopelessness we can feel is very real, but my understanding is this, the Spirit is always giving us calls to action and reasons to hope. We pray to make a difference in Ashland, Virginia, the place where we are planted, and opportunities to show God's love almost fall out of the sky and into our laps. Presbyterian Women are following "Mary's story" from poverty to working and becoming independent. We can pray for these kids we

will send to summer camp. And so it goes. We offer kindness, we seek justice, we help and we learn, and we walk with God with each passing step hoping that we might see through his eyes what we are to do in this world that others say cannot be done. Amen.