

# Holy Spirit Living

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Acts 6 and 7

Reverend Heather Miner

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The Holy Spirit is the force of creation, the inconceivable power that swept over the face of the waters before there was light in Genesis.

The Holy Spirit, as described by my friend Helen, is the way God is with us each day.

The Holy Spirit is mighty enough to move an ocean and close enough to move a soul.

The Holy Spirit is the life force of a church.

Pentecost is called the birthday of the church for it is the day that the Holy Spirit came down as a mighty wind and landed upon the disciples. The disciples had been faithfully waiting in Jerusalem as Jesus had told them. They hadn't done much of anything yet, except choose one more disciple to replace Judas. No one had heard from them. Then, the Holy Spirit came, and the disciples began to speak in every language. All who were there heard them speaking of the power of God in a way they could understand.

Now the Holy Spirit is as ancient as creation itself. It did not suddenly come into existence at Pentecost. But at Pentecost, for those who were faithfully waiting for Jesus' gift to them, it rushed upon them and enabled them to speak in a way that was heard by all who were gathered. It was the Holy Spirit that broke down the barriers of language and culture and called a people to join together in the name of Jesus, 3000 that day. The Holy Spirit called them, in the name of Jesus, to be church, to be the movement of God. As it did for them that day, the Holy Spirit continues to move among us. It continues to break us out of categories and take us beyond our own vision, that we might enter--that we might invite others to enter--into a relationship with God. A Jesus relationship.

There's an old understanding among many seminary professors that one has to be careful when trying to describe Jesus. They recall a professor named Earl who once wrote a book about Jesus. After much prayer and research, Earl ended up describing Jesus as one who liked to get up in the morning and study, enjoyed long walks, and liked to spend time with good friends sharing in the fruit of the vine. Earl would arrive at his office at 5 a.m. in the morning to study the ancient texts, go for an afternoon walk, and would meet his Episcopalian friends in the early evening where wine is always shared.

It is a cautionary tale to be sure. A Jesus relationship

with God is not about trying to be like a man we don't really know, but it is about faithfulness and trust, and a willingness to be led, not by our will, but by God's will.

This church-birthing Holy Spirit helps us out for it pushes us out into places that are uncomfortable and vulnerable where we stand only by faith. And it connects us to God, the same creative power of God that Jesus lived within when he walked this earth. When we are willing to allow the Holy Spirit to lead us into uncomfortable and vulnerable places, as it by its own nature must do, we live within the same power Jesus knew. We have a chance to be like Jesus whether or not we drink wine with friends in the evenings.

About a decade ago now, What Would Jesus Do bracelets became popular, especially as gifts Sunday School teachers would give their students. The Christian stores were full of items with WWJD imprinted upon them--suggesting to me that there is a huge desire in our hearts to be and do like Jesus. Don't you all want to be as compassionate, as wise, as able to heal, as able to love, as connected to God as was Jesus?

My friend Jennifer told me a story about a guru who told his student to go and pray like Jesus. Even Eastern religious folk think Jesus is well connected. The person replied, well how do I do that?

I'll tell you how. Let's remember to be compassionate, to be wise, to be able to heal, to be able to love, to live as God's children, to have the Holy Spirit power working in you...you must first yield your will to God's. This is what it means to be faithful, to trust God enough that you yield your will to God's will. Then, like it did for Jesus, the Holy Spirit can lead you where you need to go.

The cross wasn't Jesus' choice. He didn't agree to being tortured so he could become a holier spiritual being. It wasn't like he needed to walk on hot coals so he could transcend the feeling of pain. The cross was where the Holy Spirit led him. It was where Jesus needed to go to do the work God needed him to do. "Not my will, but your will be done."

The cross, the sign of our unfaithfulness, is the sign of Jesus' faith.

Let's be clear. You are not meant to die on a cross. Where the Holy Spirit leads you has everything to do with who God created you to be. Meaning that if you choose again

today to be faithful, to give your life to the Jesus way, and you are not made for the wilds of Africa, the Holy Spirit is not going to send you there. But the Holy Spirit may have you open a door you've resisted opening for a long time. For you, for those you are meant to love, that is the way of life.

There are people here who opened that door recently... already a bit of light is entering in.

But, our Lord knows, it is not easy.

In Stephen's long speech he tells the story of Israel, our story, and about how often we get in the way of God's way. We are like the brothers of Joseph, not believing our youngest brother might be receiving visions from God. We are like those who faced Moses after he killed an Egyptian who was hurting an Israelite, our brother. Instead of standing with Moses and helping him fight this injustice, we got on our high camel and told Moses he was in the wrong, status quo was in the right, and chased him out of our land. We are like the Israelites in the desert complaining against Moses, accusing him of it being his fault we no longer lived the lives of slaves.

Which prophets did you not persecute? Stephen accuses.

Walk humbly. You and I are more likely to push away the Holy Spirit than we are to live Holy Spirit lives. There are forces in us that cannot stand the Holy Spirit. It asks too much.

Abraham, the one Stephen uses as a model of Holy Spirit living, goes when and where God tells him to go. There's no setting up a home for him.

Peter, when the Holy Spirit comes to him, stands in front of the temple and says to the people who have come to worship as they've always worshipped..."you killed Jesus, the one God sent. Now repent, turn around, change."

Stephen, the one who was filled with the Holy Spirit, said too much and was killed.

It doesn't seem as easy to put that WWJD bracelet on now, does it?

The Holy Spirit life is unsettling. The Holy Spirit life is humbling. The Holy Spirit life brings you face to face with danger.

Remember it is the nature of the Holy Spirit to direct us outside our perceived limits. We will be uncomfortable. In fact, we might even be downright irritated.

I'm sure part of you is fidgeting. This yielding isn't sounding like much fun. So, why try? Why not just let Jesus do it? After all, Jesus is the son of God, we're not. If we simply believe in Jesus, sing some songs, isn't that enough?

I have to laugh at myself. Mary had asked me last Sunday to drive to Santa Ana between services and pick up some of the people from Morning Garden. It's busy here on Sunday, I didn't really want to leave, but I had already said "yes" to Mary. When I went up to her after 8:00 service and said, "well, when are we leaving?" She answered, "I'm not." My Sunday routine is mixed up, I'm driving out alone, there isn't much time...I'm not thinking the holiest of thoughts. When I arrived, well, I wasn't needed after all. There was Lucy. Everyone fit into her car. Still, I got to see Lucy at work. I got to see a friend I had made that week. I got to see Myra, the young director, faithfully shepherding all of them. I got to see a brave band of people who were willing to come to an unknown place to worship with us in a language they are still learning because of Mary's love. I got to witness something bigger going on.

In our scripture, Stephen is the model of Holy Spirit living. He was chosen to handle a controversy within the church--the fact that the widows of those who spoke a different language were being neglected in the distribution of food. Stephen and six others were brought in to handle the distribution. Stephen is the first one named. He is introduced as one who is filled with faith and the Holy Spirit.

Did you notice the order of these characteristics? He is filled with faith and the Holy Spirit. Are you listening? He is filled with \_\_\_\_\_ and the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit can not enter in without faith...by faith the disciples had gathered in Jerusalem.

Filled with faith and the Holy Spirit, Stephen becomes the point person and the one who is targeted by those who aren't. They who, by the way, are trying to do all the right, prescribed rituals that they might be on the right side of God, their faith life comfortably lived within the practices of temple. They are the ones who believe and sing a good song. Like I already confessed, I'm not so far away from them.

However, I can't help but notice there's more offered. While martyrdom is not on the list of goals I have for my life, I do notice there is more than martyrdom in the account of Stephen. With faith and the Holy Spirit, Stephen was able to perform wonders on this earth. With the Holy Spirit, Stephen was able to speak boldly to a people who wanted to squash him and his words. With the Holy Spirit, when all went wrong and he was about to die, he was given a vision that made him shout out with joy. With the Holy Spirit, when he was about to be killed by those who hated him, Stephen prayed the prayer of Jesus..."Forgive them."

I want to do those things...

I want God to perform wonders on this earth with people I love who are imprisoned by circumstance, by the things of this world. I want to help them to be free. I want to speak boldly. I want to speak truth and not be silent because I have already decided what the other's response will be. I want to stop contracting to fit into the world and start expanding to love more boldly. I want to know joy, to know I'm welcome into the heavenly fellowship, when I'm about to die. And, I want that transcendent power that allows Stephen to call out for forgiveness for those who kill him...that same peace now and forever.

In view of these wonders I can know, in view of this invitation to enter into a Jesus relationship with God, to offer others this kind of relationship, I'm becoming more and more willing to be a little, a lot, uncomfortable. How about you?

In the book *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller tells of being part of a church start. They had been meeting for a number of years and attendance hovered around 30. They had a prayer time midweek. It was of the type where they would share their troubles and pray for one another. There are times in which this can be powerful. And there are times when this becomes as routine as temple practice long ago. It seems as if they were experiencing the latter. One week their pastor showed up, as Miller describes, "sort of beaten-looking." That is a sure sign the Holy Spirit is knocking on your door.

Miller goes on to explain. "Rick had been to some sort of pastor's reception where a guy spoke about how the church has lost touch with people who didn't know about Jesus. Rick said he was really convicted about this and asked us if we thought we needed to repent and start loving people who were very different from us. We all told him yes, we did, but I don't think any of us knew what that meant. Rick said he thought it meant we should live missional lives, that we should intentionally befriend people who are different from us. I didn't like the sound of that, to be honest. I didn't want to befriend somebody just to trick them into going to my church. Rick said that was not what he was talking about. He said he was talking about loving people just because they exist—homeless people and Gothic people and gays and fruit nuts. And then I liked the sound of it. I liked the idea of loving people just to love them, not to get them to come to church. If the subject of church came up, I could tell them about *Imago Dei*, but until then, who cared. So we started praying every week that God would teach us to live missional lives, to notice people who needed to be loved." (135)

Of course, the effect was, lots of people started coming to church.

You know why. If the Holy Spirit is what gave birth to the church, then when we become faithful, when we do what Jesus has told us to do as the disciples did long ago, believing Jesus' words are to us as much as they were to them, the Holy Spirit takes hold of us, allows us to speak in the language those we meet will understand. The words we speak will tell of God's power, of Jesus, of how much God truly loves them...enough to get involved with their lives.

Enough to get involved in your life.

Today, and forever more.