

Ephesians 5:15 – 6:9 “Portal of Blessing”

We're in week two of a series dealing with what it means to be led by the Holy Spirit, or what it means to be “spiritual.” Last week we dealt with being spiritual on an individual level. This week I want to draw the circle a little bigger and talk about how our spirituality reaches and relates to others. There's no doubt that the first step in seeking to be a more spiritual person involves you. You are the person that the Spirit of God wants to touch and bless ... you are the person through whom the Spirit wants to work. But this week, your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to conspire with the Spirit to bring blessing to *others*.

So let's start with your family. There is no person better than you to know exactly how to start a fight with someone in your family. You know how to push the right buttons to do maximum damage to your spouse, significant other, boyfriend, girlfriend, or whoever. But ... there's also nobody better than you to love and enhance that person's ability to thrive than you. Same goes for your parents, children, siblings or any other significant close relationship in your life. The Spirit wants to conspire with you to make their lives rich, full, free, good, and fruitful. When Jesus wanted to confront religious hypocrisy in his day, he pointed out the way hypocrites served their religion at the expense of their families. Even Paul picked up on this and called out that kind of behavior in his letters to the early churches. He called that sort of behavior worse than unbelief. So Paul urged husbands and wives to submit to one another and show one another true love and respect. And yes, this is Paul we're talking about. Sometimes we read passages like what Barbara just read and we think, “What in the world was Paul's problem?” But believe it or not, his words were progressive by the standards of his time. So let's give Paul a break. Even Katy the New Testament scholar gives Paul a break. Most of the time. But think about it, Paul was promoting mutual *responsibility*, not just top-down tyranny. He also told children to obey their parents, for parents to nurture their children and how to raise them without piling unrealistic and unclear demands on them. So that's the circle of family. The Spirit can work

through you to help spread the Spirit among those who either live with or are closest to you. The ones you spend the most time with. Makes sense.

But let's draw that circle even bigger and go somewhere that may seem like a strange place for you to help promote the Spirit's work. Let's draw that circle to include the folks who we spend the most time with *outside* our families. Let's talk about our work. And to do that, we need to talk about slavery, because there it is in our scripture for this morning. Now this *is* Katy's realm of scholarship, but we've got another five months to get past our boundary clause before we can invite her back to preach. So you'll have to pardon my oversimplification of this subject. Think of slavery more as a non-monetary way of working off debt rather than just pure human trafficking because that's what Paul is addressing here in Ephesians. Paul urged slaves to transcend social norms by doing their work with pride and dignity. Before, slaves may have given the least required by a human master, but now in the Spirit, they would work for and with God to give their best. With that in mind, let's talk about our workplaces ... where we do business. James, in his epistle, used strong language to warn rich employers not to underpay their workers. What employers might call "keeping labor costs low," James called "wage theft" and reminded employers that God hears the cries of every underpaid laborer. Our economic behavior will change greatly when we stop asking questions like, "How little will the market or the law allow me to pay this person?" Instead, the Spirit leads people to conspire around new questions like, "What would God consider a fair and generous pay to this person? How can we expand the bottom line from economic profits to something deeper and broader like economic and social benefits? How could our business and economic system and policies become less harmful and more beneficial to abundant life on planet Earth ... both for us and future generations? Could we measure success not by how much we consume and how fast we can consume it, but by how well we live, care, and serve? Just imagine how the business world would change if more and more of us went to work conspiring goodness in the Spirit. Think how fast that Spirit would spread!

Okay, let's draw the circle even bigger and include our neighbors. I'm not just talking about the people who live on our block. I'm including strangers we meet on our streets too. Whatever their race, class, religion, sexual identity, political party, whatever ... they're our neighbors. And the Spirit will constantly lead us to opportunities to serve and care. The Bible constantly emphasizes the importance of hospitality to strangers. Jesus said, "As you have done to the least of these, you have done for me." So the Spirit is looking for those who are interested in planting goodness in their communities. Ask yourself this question sometime: "What would our community look like if God's dreams for it were coming true?" The answer ... the vision we have is the Holy Spirit's answer as well as the motivation to make it so.

Guess what we're going to do now? We're going to draw the circle even bigger. Let's draw that circle to include invisible people. "You were doing great there for a while preacher, but now you're losing it." I'm not talking invisible people as in people who aren't really there. I'm talking about people who are there but you may not see. People who are easily forgotten. I'm talking orphans, widows, refugees, prisoners, people with special needs, the sick, the poor, the uneducated, the unemployed, the underemployed, the underpaid, those who are silently grieving, silently struggling with addiction, silently struggling with mental illness. The Holy Spirit invites us to translate our faith into action ... to move out and among those who are easily overlooked so that they might receive the Spirit as well.

Here's a tough one, but it's still a necessary circle to draw. Let's draw the circle to include civic and community life. We're told in the New Testament to pray for our political leaders. It's true! Whether we agree with them or not. We're told to avoid debt. We're told to be good stewards of our resources. The world, as difficult as it is to admit, is bound together in one economy ... and I'm not talking currency, I'm talking *economy*. To be in tune with the Spirit is to transcend all smaller boundaries and to work within the whole. That's a lot easier said than

done though. It's tough for people to get along and work together. Because we see the world through different filters, we often make enemies out of those who aren't like us. People we don't understand can be annoying. They try our patience. And guess what ... we do things that others don't understand. We annoy people. We try others' patience because of the way we understand things. The Spirit invites us to rediscover others, find common ground, and try to walk in their shoes. To ignore others or to be in constant conflict with others stunts our spiritual growth.

I can't talk about the importance of drawing bigger circles for the Spirit to work without mentioning the way we use our words. Here's where I could go on a big tangent about what James says in his epistle about the power of the tongue. Chapter 3 is devoted to the power of our words. With our words, we can bless God and do wonderful things. But on the other hand, we can start a destructive fire that consumes the world. Words can wound. Careless words, overly-critical words, condemning words, harsh words, insulting words, dehumanizing words, or words of gossip and deception do so much damage. James says that if your life were like a ship, your words serve as that ship's rudder. So if you want to be a mature agent in the movement of God's Spirit in the world, ask the Spirit's help in choosing your words. Think about this – You will never regret uttering a kind and encouraging word. You'll never regret holding your tongue when you want to say something mean and damaging. Think of all the people who might be encouraged by a kind word from you! An overworked person in customer service. A housekeeper in a hotel. A table server in a busy, understaffed restaurant. A landscaper or janitor. A mother on a plane with a cranky child. A nurse in the emergency room. Think about how much a kind word, an encouraging note or a big tip could make a difference in someone's life. Words!! They're important. Use them well. You can be like a secret agent of God's blessing in any of these circles I've mentioned if you use your words wisely.

There's one circle that I don't want to forget, but I'll bring it up anyway because we might think this is a no-brainer and not worth mentioning. Let's talk about the circle of our church ... our community of faith. Church is training ground for encouraging others to let the Spirit keep flowing and moving in one another's lives. Here is where we learn how to draw these bigger circles and find ways to distribute the Spirit throughout the world. This is where we encourage each other to let the Spirit keep flowing and moving in one another's lives. But it's important to keep showing up and to show up with good attitudes and open hearts. It's especially important to be a portal of blessing to those who lead in your community of faith ... elders, deacons, board members, ministry coordinators ... pastors and staff. Help them feel appreciated. Their work is so important. Your encouragement could make the difference in whether they give up or keep on giving their best.

Okay, one more circle and I promise we'll be done. This one is big. This is one that extends beyond humans and includes all living things and all physical structures on which we all depend. I'm talking the whole of creation. You can't claim to love your neighbor then turn around and pollute the earth on which you and your neighbor depend. You can't claim to love the Creator but abuse creation. The Holy Spirit that moves among us is the same Spirit that moves in and through all creation. The same Spirit that hovered over the waters when the earth was formless and void before God said, "Let there be light."

In all these circles, you can be a part of a conspiracy that's spreading quietly across our world. And your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to be a secret agent of God's commonwealth ... God's kingdom ... to work behind the scenes to plot goodness and encourage kindness wherever we go.