

I mentioned last summer that on vacation Carole and I worshiped with five different congregations over two weekends. Two congregations were predominantly black, and three congregations were predominantly white. The first congregation we visited, predominately white, had ministered to us at a time of great personal need. We love the church. We loved its founding pastor. And we wanted to be ministered to again by them.

We went to their Saturday evening worship service. We were in the building, mostly in the worship service, for about 90 minutes altogether. Not one person spoke to us. I introduced myself to a man before worship began, and we talked briefly and introduced our wives to each other. Otherwise, there was no greeting of one another in the worship service, and no greeter at the door, no usher in the aisle, and no casual conversation ever made contact with us the entire time.

The sermon was faithful to the Bible, the worship team was smooth, and the worship leader told a powerful, personal story of faith, but it all felt distant and disconnected. The congregation could have been mall rats, going from one store window to the next, looking for something that might interest their bored, disengaged selves.

The experience hit me hard for three reasons. First, it was nothing like the church that had helped us 23 years ago. Second, I wondered if BVBC is like that. I don't think so, but our congregation is a lot like that congregation in other respects. What if . . .? I dread the thought. The third reason the experience hit me hard happened the next morning. We worshiped in the church where Carole and I got married.

We got there late, and it was hard to find a seat. The congregation, predominately black, treated us with great courtesy, and their courtesy turned into something that felt like affection. The congregation greeted each other, and it felt good. The pastor came back to our seats and welcomed us. Hey, if Martians visit Venus, the Venusians will take note. And we experienced the morning offering. They don't pass the plate. You walk out of your pew down the center aisle, put your offering in the plate under the watchful eye of ministers and deacons, and go back to your pew.

I was sitting on the end of the pew, and I got up to go down front at the wrong time, and this lady behind us put her hand on my arm, smiled, and said, "Not yet," and she did it in a way that made my mistake just go away. I asked her what someone would do, who didn't have a gift, and she explained that you just stayed in your seat. It was okay. As people came back to their seats, they passed by me, and time after time, people would shake my hand or give me a fist bump or just touch me on the shoulder.

The sermon was faithful to the Bible, and the music was enthusiastic and communal. We shared the Lord's Supper. New members joined the church. The pastor talked about their ministry that afternoon on North Avenue, a dangerous street in Baltimore. We didn't know any of those people, but they made us feel like we were in it together. They made us feel like we were home.

### **Filled with the Spirit**

I share that experience with you for one reason only. I want to read the first line of our text today and ask you a question. Here's the text. Ephesians 5:18: **Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.** Here's my question: Which of those two congregations felt like it was filled with the Spirit? The answer is a no-brainer, and it got me to thinking about verse 18.

Whatever we think it means to be filled with the Spirit, it is probably not enough. It almost certainly leaves out the text before us today. We are accustomed to think of being filled with the Spirit as personal and private. Ephesians 5 makes it personal and communal. Verses 19-21 do not tell the whole story of being filled with the Spirit, but they tell exactly the part we are most likely to leave out.

Here's what they say: **Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father in everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.** Whatever this looks like in practice, it is communal. We are in it together. Whatever this looks like in practice, verse 18 tells us what we should expect from congregation to congregation.

**Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.** Do you know those parties where everybody gets a buzz from beer, wine, and spirits, or they get a high on pot, coke, or meth? I suppose there's a lot to like, but those parties do have a downside. People drive home under the influence. They develop addictions. They behave in ways they regret later.

Christ has a better idea. **Be filled with the Spirit.** It's a daring comparison. Clearly, Paul thought that when Christians got together to worship, it was to be a rousing, joyful time – a bona fide alternative to frat party excesses, and a whole world away from the solitary soul getting drunk or getting high alone.

That's what got me to thinking: I know what it is like to be filled with the Spirit – when the fire inside me flares up and flames out into situations and transforms them. I am never more myself than in those moments, and I am never less important than in those moments. Christ is everything. His love transforms those moments.

So, what happens to me when I walk in here on a Sunday morning? I become guarded. But what am I guarding myself against? The fire I often feel before I come here on Sunday morning **is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears.** (Hosea 6:4) Where did it go? What dried it up? Am I a dust storm that hides the Son of Love from your worship experience? It ought not to be. I don't want that.

### Music and Thanksgiving

Verses 19–21 set out the conditions under which the Spirit fills the Church with love, joy, and self-forgetfulness. The first is music. **Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.** Whether it comes from your smart phone, or over the loudspeaker in the store, or on the movie soundtrack, telling us how we're supposed to feel, music touches us like almost nothing else in life touches us. There are few other places in life where untrained people sing as the Church does, when we are together, often with gusto and great joy.

There are times, when something transcendent happens as we sing. We don't want it to end. We don't want to go home. Christ is present. Heaven breaks through into our small lives. Sharing those moments with you is as good as it gets.

In those moments we meet the second condition of Spirit-filled experience. We put our hearts into what is going on. The second half of verse 19: **Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord.** The act of worship is about Him. He is the audience of one for everything we do. Worship is like every other relationship in life: you get out of it

what you put into it. When we put our hearts into it to honor the Lord, then we are open to the Spirit to visit us with power from on high.

How do we prepare ourselves to come here on Sunday? If you were invited to a White House dinner, you would make preparations, and you would have certain feelings about being there. When the Church meets in the name of Jesus, heaven and earth intersect. The Kingdom of God becomes visible for a few shining moments. The powers of the Age to Come gather with us. Why not put ourselves in a frame of mind that is fitting for such a moment?

The third condition of Spirit-filled experience goes a long way toward creating that frame of mind: **always giving thanks to God the Father in everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.** Why don't we wake up on Sunday morning and say this: "Lord, I thank you for this day, when we remember the resurrection of Jesus our Lord. Thank you for your infinite mercy and patience. Thank you for friends I haven't seen in a week. Thank you for what you are going to do in us today."

Does that seem artificial to you? It only seems artificial, because it's new in our experience. All new things seem strange at first. Do you think you are just working yourself up emotionally and then saying it was the Holy Spirit? It could be. But haven't you ever had guests you dreaded to have in your home? But you determined you were going to put a good face on it, and you actually had an enjoyable time with them. Any relationship can seem fake. Any relationship can be fake. But almost any relationship can also be a gateway to something good, if we just give it a chance.

So, let's give worship a chance. Let's give the Spirit a chance. Let's prime our hearts with thanksgiving. Let's prime our hearts with anticipation. Let's come here determined to give ourselves to what is going on. Let's be filled with the Spirit.

Verse 21 is also a condition of Spirit-filled worship. **Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.** Spirit-filled worship is tuned in to the people with whom we worship. Spirit-filled worship considers the interests of the people we worship with and how we might contribute to their well being, even if doing it might take us out of our comfort zone.

### Take-aways

You know God is reinventing BVBC. He does that about every 20 years, preceded by about five years of turmoil and uncertainty. I could not have told you in 1975 what the next 20 years would hold. I could not have told you in 1995 what the next 20 years would hold. I can't tell you today what the next 20 years will hold. God is graciously, unexpectedly, disturbingly stirring the pot in this church. Here are five ways He is doing that.

First, we have watched three strong, sister, evangelical churches melt down. One of them is just gone. The Lord of the Church has snuffed out its flame, removed its candlestick. If it can happen to good churches like them, BVBC is not immune. We journey into our future with that ominous danger present to our minds, and it shapes what we do and how we do it.

A second force is the homosexual cultural revolution. That revolution placed enormous burdens on parents. It puts people at risk of losing their jobs, if they speak their moral convictions. It raises the specter of Christians being intimidated into silence by this secular intolerance. Can we learn how to speak and to act in this oppressive culture? We

have so often spoken poorly in the past. Can we be engaging and keep the conversation going. We have many new habits to learn.

Third, We have been shaken to the core by the elimination of a half a dozen staff people. God is teaching us that we do need each other, that we have to work together, and we can work together, and that the good things that made us successful in the past won't be good enough to make us successful in the future He has in store for us.

Fourth, God is sending us exciting new people to be part of this church. Do you know who they are? They bring a set of questions and experiences we've never had to deal with. Can we invite them into the joyful relationship with Christ that we have known? Do we have the patience and the discipline to do that what we have to do?

Finally, there is a new unity among staff and board that I have never seen before. If that unity holds, it prepares us to go together into the future God is preparing for us and not lose our way.

If you see and experience what I see and experience, then the reinvention of BVBC will gain traction throughout the congregation. I would like to think that what happens when we worship together will change. Instead of singing like embarrassed middle school students, struggling through the Star-Spangled Banner, we will be filled with the Spirit. Strangers of any race or denominational background and of no religious background will come in here and feel like it's home.

That's worthy of calling as God's dwelling place on earth. That's how a congregation imitates the love of God. That's the will of God.