

SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk (Delivered on Sunday, January 23, 2022)

Text: **Luke 4:14-21** (*NRSV/The Inclusive Bible*)

Intro to today's text: With the Spirit upon him, Jesus, in today's reading from the Gospel according to Luke, teaches of God's good ways and proclaims good news to those whose lives have not experienced good. Such ways and news cry out to be heard and done today in our time as well.

The past may instruct; the future may beckon, but today is when these ways and this news need to be lived and fulfilled. As we listen to these powerful words, may the Spirit empower us with boldness and trust.

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: *The Spirit of our God is upon me; because the Most High has anointed me to bring Good News to those who are poor. God has sent me to proclaim liberty to those held captive, recovery of sight to those who are blind, and release to those in prison—to proclaim the year of our God's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Reflecting with Pastor Donald Shenk: *"Where the Spirit Leads"*

During these last years of preparation for my ordination, which may eventually happen, Lord willing and the virus don't rise, I naively enrolled in the hardest and most frustrating class of my educational life. Well, that is if you don't count the basic Fundamentals of Math class I had to take as a freshman in college. Do I need to tell you my verbal scores were a bit higher than my math scores on the SAT?!

But I kid. The course labeled "Systematic Theology" at the Claremont School of Theology trumped any mathematical course I ever attempted in college. But, surprisingly enough, it was in this phenomenally cerebral course that I learned more about the Spirit's leading than in any other class I have ever had. In fact, I concentrated on the work and movement of the Spirit with my final paper for the class entitled, are you ready for this, "Dancing to Delight and Dancing to Destroy: A Process Perichoresis." I'll have copies ready for you at the door.

Just in case you're wondering, the term Perichoresis is from the Greek and refers to the relationship of the three persons of the triune God, traditionally known as the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, made more inclusive within our progressive theology, with the words Creator,

Redeemer and Sustainer, although that terminology makes the blood of our evangelical brethren absolutely boil with indignation prompting accusations of heresy.

Perichoresis is also known in its Latin derivation as Circumincession, which the amazing Richard Rohr has taken up and explored so brilliantly in his book, "Divine Dance."

Have I lost you yet? I know I'm starting to get rather bogged down myself. This was one of the wild aspects of taking a class such as Systematic Theology. The heady concepts and the ways in which humankind has wrestled with the many aspects of the divine and tried to identify them in human terms can be compared to a rather clunky dance done by an inexperienced adolescent with two left feet. How's that for a picture?

But part of what I discovered amidst the extreme frustrations of this class (many of which Kim vicariously experienced through my many angst-ridden tirades), was that the Spirit was having a fantastic and hilarious time of it as She giggled at my attempts to understand Her and to try and pin her down for an academic paper.

I think this paragraph from the final version of my paper, wherein I quote a bit from the potentate of Process Theology's work, John Cobb, will give you an idea of how the Spirit was having Her way with me:

"How will we join in the dance?" I wrote. "How do we hold hands with a Spirit 'which will forever tease and tantalize, trick and telepathize, coming not in coherence but rocks and jives, [Who] syncopates and celebrates, dies and polymorphizes around, under, and over the beat?' Are we aware as we take each step what we are bringing to life, as our hands rise to strike the timbrel? Do we know what we are destroying as each foot falls on the ground behind another's imprint? Do we ever dance as one or is every dance the dance of many?"

As you can see, the Spirit was leading me into a dance I wasn't completely comprehending but felt compelled to collaborate in. And I believe THAT is the Spirit that has been at work since the primordial waters covered the face of the earth and prompted the Creator to bring about these crazy lifeforms to join with Her in a dance of both joy and sorrow; a twirling dervish of creating and destroying.

When Jesus stands up before his hometown crowd at the synagogue in Galilee as Dave told us about today, Luke says he was "filled with the power of the Spirit." And, indeed, the words that first issue forth from Jesus' mouth as he unrolls the ancient scroll of the prophet Isaiah are this, "The Spirit of our God is upon me."

This is the Spirit that will enable him to claim his rightful place as God's son, and accept the mantle of the Most High. This is the Spirit that will not only anoint him, but accompany him and prod him to bring good news to the poor, liberty to the captive, sight to the blind and release to those in prison.

I'll admit to you that I was having a bit of a challenge reflecting on this passage from Luke this week. I kept trying to organize my thoughts and find the through line and see where God wanted to take me and then I realized with a start and a laugh early one morning that the Spirit was upon me and wanted me to wake up to Her. The Spirit didn't want to go where I was trying to direct Her. She wanted to run free. The Spirit wanted to take me somewhere I had not expected and show me a different way of thinking about how She lead Jesus and how she is leading each one of us.

When we are led by the spirit we never know where She will take us, you know. Think back in your own life to some of the most extraordinary and exciting things that have happened to you when YOU have let the spirit lead you into the unknown. What happened to you and for you when you allowed the Spirit to lead you into that which didn't seem possible and dance with you around all that seemed impossible?

Were you able to let go and join in the dance? Or did you find yourself standing in the corner and hoping to blend in with the wallpaper? Maybe sipping a glass of pathetic punch?

When we are led by the Spirit, it means we let go of all that we thought we knew and all that we thought we had planned and allow the Spirit to create our path and direct our feet and show us a brand-new way of being or a different way of doing something than we had ever done it before.

And when we listen to the Spirit's voice and claim the Spirit's power to be upon us, we are able to hear Her voice more clearly and, like Jesus, understand our path and our purpose and know that we have a partner who will go with us into the unknown.

When I was riding my bike to the church on Thursday morning I passed two women, seemingly unconnected, but walking fairly closely to each other even though it seemed they had no idea the other one was there.

The first woman cheered my heart and certainly seemed as if she was being led by the Spirit as her arms lifted joyously and she smiled and looked up, looking for a connection with my spirit as she opened wide her eyes and revealed her very happy heart.

The woman following not too far behind her, in contrast, was completely downcast, not meeting my greeting or my eyes, but rather looking down and away from me – obviously obsessed with something other than the present.

And yet, who's to say she wasn't being led by the Spirit as well? Let us not forget that the same Spirit that rested upon Jesus at His baptism and when he proclaimed the year of God's favor, is the same Spirit that led Him into the wilderness where he would be met with temptation and slayed by sorrow for 40 days and 40 nights.

Just because we're not in a happy place, doesn't necessarily mean we aren't being led by the Spirit. As Joni Mitchell's fabulous song, "A Case of You" says, and I'm paraphrasing, "Go with it, stay with it, but be prepared to bleed."

We never know where the spirit will lead us but the more we can surrender to her guidance and her dance the more enlightened and joyful we have the possibility of being in our lives.

I'm speaking from experience here, you know. I certainly would have never expected to become your minister, much less an ordained one, and yet when I look back at all the twists and turns and the twirls and swirls I took on my way here I see the Spirit guiding me in her joyous laughing and dancing ways.

"Jesus was a charismatic messiah" writes commentator Bob Cornwall. "He was filled with the Spirit, and the Spirit empowered him to keep strong and keep preaching. Jesus passed on the mantle to his disciples and to all who follow."

As each one of us takes up this mantle, so necessary to be worn in this world desperate for the Good News and the healing ways of Jesus, let us also remember that we – every one of us - are filled with the Spirit and that the Spirit is always speaking to us and urging us to join in the dance.

Here is a snippet of "Dance, Dervish Dance" from the ancient wisdom of the Persian poet Hafiz:

Dance, dervish dance-
Bring the Face of God before you.

Only Love can lift the heart up so high
That its true Color is restored by the Sun!
See [the Spirit] near and clapping,
That Perfect One who [parents] Divine Rhythm.

O dance, dervish dance,
And know you bring your Master happiness
Whenever you smile.

...Dance dervish dance—
Bring the Face,
O bring the Face of your Beloved
Before You!

Amen.