

**Text: Mark 1.4-11**

As you know, I recently had the opportunity to spend a week with five of our young people at The Gathering in Lansing. It was amazing: 420 young people—and a pretty good number of us older folks—all worshipping God, singing praises, and facing tough issues. And this year our keynote speaker was a woman by the name of Rev. Neichelle Guidry. She was a powerful voice calling our kids to join a rebellion of love. A rebellion based on a courageous relationship with Jesus Christ. A rebellion that would stand up to the voices of hatred and exclusion; and challenge racism, greed, bigotry, and injustice in our world, in Jesus’ name.

It was thrilling to be there. The music was inspiring, the skill shops were enlightening, and the worship was electrifying. But at one point Rev. Guidry mentioned in passing that she’s from a Charismatic background—which made sense because she had us singing “Holy Spirit, You are Welcome Here” every day, and she kept asking if she could “get an ‘Amen’ to that,” and she tended to be more emotional than we Lutherans might be used to in our preaching—and to be honest; I bristled a bit at the thought that she might not be 100% on-board with the whole Lutheran thing.

You see, the Charismatic movement is a little bit different, it emphasizes the Holy Spirit and gifts of the Spirit; they tend to practice gifts like speaking in tongues and faith healing, and prophesy... and most of us Lutherans just aren’t that comfortable with any of that. Oh, we offer a nod to the Holy Spirit when we repeat the Apostles’ Creed—we say: “I believe in the Holy Spirit...” along with a laundry list of other disconnected things we believe in like “the holy catholic church, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” We mention those things... but that’s it.

It’s like: “Yeah, we believe in the Spirit; but we’d really rather not talk about it,” because the Spirit makes us nervous. The Holy Spirit is the loose cannon of the Trinity. The Father seems stable; maybe a bit too remote—too high above our position—to have any real impact on us. But we believe in God the Father; we believe in God’s power, we believe God created us and cares for us, and we’re left with a good feeling inside. And we believe Jesus is the Son of God, the one anointed to come for us, to live among us, to show us through his very visible life exactly how the invisible God thinks and acts and loves. But, all too often we think of Jesus only in the past tense. He came, he lived, he loved, he died, he rose again, and he left... end of story. So we love him, we’re thankful for him; we study him and even apply some of the truths he taught to our own lives... And he leaves us feeling warm and cozy too, because we think his act on this stage is complete; we think of him as being fossilized in history so we can hold him at arm’s length.

But the Spirit is now, the Spirit is active; the Spirit is this persistent pest buzzing around us like a mosquito circling our ears: nudging, nagging; pushing, prodding; inciting us, tempting us to try things that might seem kind of crazy, tempting us to take risks, opening us to God’s grace, challenging us to take action. You can’t pin the Spirit down, it’s hard to analyze the Spirit, hard to verify if the Spirit is talking to us and through us, and to and through our sisters and brothers. You can take the Bible and scrutinize it; you can study God and Jesus, and create timelines and histories—and the Spirit is inside that book too and you can study what the Spirit’s done in the past—but the Spirit isn’t just in the book, the Spirit is also outside the box (which God and Jesus are too if we stop to think about it) but the Spirit is blatantly out of the box... and let’s face it, that drives us a little bit crazy.

So we’d just as soon forget about the Spirit... But the problem is that the Spirit is so central to Jesus’ baptism and his life and his ministry... and the Spirit is so central to who we are

called to be. And, no, it's not comfortable for us; it's just not comfortable to have to think and pray and seek wisdom in discerning if the Spirit is really calling us to do this or that or the other thing... or if maybe it's just a passing thought, a selfish urge, or another crazy scheme. In Dickens' Christmas Carol, Scrooge won't trust his eyes when the ghost of Jacob Marley comes to him, he denies the reality of the ghost saying: "You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!" And, in a way, I think we have the same response to the Holy Spirit... we don't trust ourselves to discern the difference between the Spirit's presence and acid indigestion.

So we rub our eyes and shake our heads and pretend the Spirit isn't real—isn't pertinent for this age—or that we've outgrown the need for such a "spirit." But then we look at texts like this one in Mark, and we hear how God ripped the heavens asunder, leaving that opening between the Kingdom of God and the realm of mortals... and the Holy Spirit slips through that opening, and descends on Jesus, and affirms his identity as the Son of God. And the Spirit accompanied him into the wilderness where he was tempted, and the Spirit empowered him in his mission, the Spirit opened Jesus to the needs of the poor and the despised. And the Spirit supported him as he challenged the traditions of the past: and sustained him when the establishment turned on him; and, eventually, the Spirit led him to the cross... the cross! I guess that's where you end up when you open yourself to the Spirit... at least that's where he ended up when he opened himself to the Spirit. Who knows where we might go; where we might end up.

But that's the deal. We who are baptized in Christ are baptized not just with the water for cleansing as a sign of repentance... that was John's baptism. John himself told us that Jesus would baptize not with water... but with the Holy Spirit itself. That's the baptism we received... and I don't think you have to speak in tongues for it to be true. It's the promise we're given: that—in baptism—God makes us one with Christ Jesus. In baptism we're made children of God: heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ. In baptism we're reminded that that rip in the veil of heaven has been left open. In baptism we're reminded that the Spirit is still alive, still rushing over the face of the deep, still wanting to turn the chaos of this world into a beautiful new creation. In baptism we rise with Jesus through the waters of new birth to accept the challenges before us: to live our lives open to the callings and nudges and power of the Spirit.

And that is a challenge for us... but it's a challenge the Spirit equips us for. Together we are brave to see the needs in our world, brave to name our faults and our sins—our complacency and collusion with the forces of evil—together we seek wisdom as we discern our mission, together we are confident in the love and power of God. In the power of the Spirit we see the openings where love just might break through the stranglehold of greed and privilege... and in the power of the Spirit, we follow Christ—step by step—from the waters of our baptism—even through the fires of this life—for the sake of all those beloved by God.

And you know what? You don't have to belong to a Charismatic denomination to accept this mission and follow this call... When I stop and think about it I'm very grateful for our Charismatic brothers and sisters, because they remind us that even we Lutheran Christians can be open to the Spirit, and in as much as we hope to remain faithful to our Lord, we must be open to the Spirit. From what I saw at The Gathering, our young people are accepting that challenge to join the rebellion of love in Christ's name and in his Spirit. May we also—who are witnesses to the baptism of Christ—accept the baptism he offers, and may the Spirit descend upon us and open our minds and hearts; and lead us, for the sake of our neighbors and our world, to take a

stand for love—a fearless stand against the powers of evil in this generation—only in His power and always to the glory of his Holy Name, Amen.