

“Believers and Receivers”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson- Psalm 62:5-12

New Testament Lesson-Acts 19:1-7

Jaime Potter-Miller, in her sermon titled “Questions,” recalls visiting a Methodist church in the then-Soviet Union. Outside the church door, she met a young man who introduced himself as Patrick. “I invited him to come in,” says Miller, “but he shook his head.” “You are a believer?” he asked her. Miller nodded, recalling that “the vodka on his breath stung (her) eyes. His jacket revealed red flag pins embossed with the face of Vladimir Lenin. If he was not a Communist, he certainly wanted to look like one. In excellent English he spit out the words, ‘You are a believer! Show me your Holy Spirit! I cannot believe what I cannot see! Where is it? What does it look like? Where can I touch it? It’s all a fantasy! A child’s game!’ Miller took his hand and turned him away from the door. “Patrick,” she said, “I will show you the Holy Spirit if you will show me the wind.” The two of them watched out on the street as leaves blew around. Flags flapped and ... women (wearing head scarves) left a trail of fringe.

He began to describe what he was seeing. Miller said, “No, Patrick, you’re telling what the wind does. Show me the wind. For I, too, can show you what the Holy Spirit does. But I cannot show you the Spirit anymore than you can show me the wind.” Patrick became very quiet, but Miller knew that just because you’ve silenced someone doesn’t mean you’ve convinced him or her. So she continued. Borrowing an action from her early years as a mother, Miller cupped Patrick’s face in her hands. Borrowing wisdom from her faith,¹ Miller spoke Patrick’s name. “Patrick,” she said, “if you are right and there is no God, then I have lost nothing by believing. But if I am right and you are wrong, then you have lost everything.”

Patrick’s eyes filled with tears and he ran out the door, Miller called after him with this assurance: “Every time you feel the wind blow remember there is a Christian in America praying for you.”²

Did Patrick ever become a believer? Did he ever receive Jesus Christ in his life? We can’t know. All we can be sure of is that Patrick was a seeker. Something brought him to the door of that church, something had him asking if God is real,

¹ Brother E. Stanley Jones, http://www.californiachristianashrams.org/?page_id=37.

² Jaime Potter-Miller, “A Question of Questions,” *Circuit Rider*, May 1992, 16-17.

something gave him the courage to stay and listen for an answer. And something had him run off into the wind, embracing an uncertain future.

It's the same something that Paul sees when he encounters disciples who have come to believe, but who have not yet received. "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" Paul asks. "No," they reply, "we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

The disciples that Paul meets in Ephesus came to believe through John the Baptizer, and Paul is astounded that they only got part of the story. "John," says Paul, "baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus. Hearing this, (John's disciples) were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus." Paul lays his hands on them, and softly the Holy Spirit comes upon them, and they begin to speak in tongues and prophesy. A divine wind blows through them, and they are moved, not unlike leaves being blown in the street, flags and scarves flying in the wind, or someone who is seeking a relationship with God running out toward a hopeful future.

Today we begin a three-part sermon series on *believing in God and receiving the Holy Spirit*. As you can imagine, these are two very different things. Belief in God without being moved by the Holy Spirit has a limited if any effect in your life or the lives of your families, friends and loved ones. And being spiritual but not religious, this too lacks a certain grounding, doesn't it? (*Contemporary Q&A*) Who here knows someone who is spiritual but not religious? What can you say about that person? What are some good qualities? ... Now, what's missing? How about people who believe in God, but don't know or follow the teachings of Jesus? Or those who say Jesus was a wise prophet and teacher, but don't believe he is God incarnate? We all have our doubts about something.

Psychiatrist Dave Larson stood at the podium pointing to a cartoon projected up on the screen. It's title was "the Agnostic Fleas." They're standing in a forest of fur, and one flea says to the other, "Sometimes I wonder if there really IS a dog"³ Most people have a certain sense that there's something greater than ourselves out there somewhere. The challenge is what to do about it; how to respond; where to search; how to apply our sense of God in our day-to-day lives?

People who are spiritual but not religious often lack a community of like-minded people to gather with, learn from, serve along side – people they can count on when all else fails them? And many of them don't even know what they're missing.

³ Jessica Cohen, "The Greatest Story Never Told," Utne Reader, March-April 1997.

We'd all love to encounter someone like Patrick – someone who's seeking after Jesus, someone drawn by an invisible force to ask *us* about our relationship with God. But how often does that happen? Not! No, on a typically day, we rarely encounter anyone openly questioning the existence of God, a person actively seeking a relationship with Christ, another soul moved by the Holy Spirit to ask you – or me – about our faith.

And yet, we are each sent into the world by Jesus, in Matthew 28, to “go, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” ***Belief in God, allegiance to Christ, and being open to the Holy Spirit – it's a package deal.***

So what, if anything, are we supposed to do if we know or encounter someone who has a sense that God exists, but doesn't know what to do about it; someone who believes in Jesus, but only as a wise prophet and teacher; someone who does not believe in God incarnate, never senses the Holy Spirit moving and working among us; someone who is uncertain about God, has questions about Jesus, and is lukewarm when it comes to learning and serving through the church? What if you recognize yourself in some of that?

Our sermon series will provide us with a starting point in addressing such questions – both for yourself and for people in your life. It will give us a place to stand along side someone who believes in God but somehow fails to act on that belief.

We'll look at what Jesus himself did in such situations, what Jesus did when people were *drawn* to God but somehow failed to follow through, failed to receive and embrace what God was offering, people who can't manage to take the next step, can't quite get beyond their sense of doubt and uncertainty.

And a good place to start is for us to become present again to our own sense of faith, our own spiritual journey, a journey that began for many of us, with our baptism, and with all that followed for that. At our first service this morning, we ordained, installed and commissioned elders, deacons and trustees as officers of First Presbyterian Church, servant leaders among us in this community of faith. As we celebrate their commitment to learn and serve through the church, it's a great time for us to renew our own sense of faith and commitment through a reaffirmation of baptism. In our baptism, we put our trust in God and turn away from sin, we accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and we go forth together to discover what that means for us as individuals, as well as for our loved ones *and* our enemies, and for the world we live in. It's not unlike the mission statement of

First Presbyterian Church: *Worship God* (put our trust in God), *follow Christ* (accept Jesus as Lord and Savior), *and live in the Spirit* (be faithful disciples).

There's not much more to that when it comes to what we believe and how we respond to it – worship God, follow Christ, and live in the Spirit. There's not much more I can say to you during this sermon series on believing in God and receiving Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit; nothing new to say than what's been said in worship and Sunday School and countless books and devotionals again and again and again, here and in churches throughout the world.

But what we can do, when we gather here next Sunday and the Sunday after, is to look for ways to break down barriers to believe in God, ways to help people to be more receptive to Christ in their lives, and ways to encourage and inspire people to grow in their faith – us included. Join us these next two weeks, won't you?

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of light and truth, we call ourselves your people; help us to be worthy of our calling. Jesus called us salt of the earth and light of the world. May we joyfully undertake the tasks before us, that through His church we may be your instruments to bring light and peace to a dark and troubled world. Give to all of us the will and ability to fulfill the promises we have made – in church membership, in ordination, in marriage, and in baptism, both ours and that of the children in our lives.

God of compassion, we turn to you on behalf of all who cry out, who search for your presence with them, who come to you in their pain or suffering. Let them hear your voice speaking from our hearts, let them feel your presence in our companionship, grant them healing through the instruments of your will.

God who knows our deepest needs, grant us the strength that comes from crying out to you, the hope that comes from knowing your healing love. Give us voices raised up in praise, voices unified in the prayer that you taught us, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.