

“Free Spirited”

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, April 28, 2013**

**Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 16
New Testament Lesson – Acts 11:1-4, 11-18**

Missionary Rita Snowden tells about some soldiers in France during World War II who brought the body of a dead comrade to a cemetery to have him buried. The priest gently asked whether their friend had been a baptized Catholic.

The soldiers did not know. The priest sadly informed them that, in that case, he could not permit burial in the church graveyard. So the soldiers dug a grave just outside the cemetery fence, and they laid their fallen comrade to rest.

The next day the soldiers came back to add some flowers – only to discover that the grave was nowhere to be found. They were quite bewildered and about to leave when the priest came over to speak with them.

It seems he was so troubled by his refusal to bury the soldier in the parish cemetery, that he had gotten no sleep the night before. So in the wee hours of the morning, the priest left his bed, and with his own hands, he moved the fence to include the body of the soldier who had died for France.

Recounting this story in “Full of Grace and Truth: Demonstrating the Divine,” Susan Andrews commented, saying, “Truth demands that we build some fences. But grace demands that the shape of those fences be flexible.”¹

It took courage and a strong sense of openness for that priest to rethink everything he was taught in order to make way for an unknown soul to be embraced by the church. It took following the Spirit of the law, rather than him being confined by the letter of the law.

AND, it was in keeping with what we are taught in the Bible. In our New Testament Lesson, Peter leads with the same sense of courage and risk-taking and openness in order to reach out to and embrace and include gentiles in his community of faith.

¹ Susan Andrews, “Full of Grace and Truth: Demonstrating the Divine,” sermon preached January 24, 1999, at National Capital Presbytery, Covenantnetwork.org.

We know that this took courage and involved some personal risk for Peter because of the way he responds to those who criticize him. His fellow Christians are not at all sure about Peter's embrace of those who live their lives outside of and apart from the church they've been called to.

Based on all that they know they know about God and God's people, the circumcised believers in Jerusalem (as they are called) criticize Peter, saying, "Why did you go to (the) uncircumcised ... and eat with them?"

And facing their criticism, Acts tells us that "Peter began to explain it to them, step by step." A step-by-step explanation, because his actions were so bold and courageous and risky.

Peter explains to them that three men came to him from Caesarea and that the Spirit told him to, quote, "go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us."

This was a big deal, because Caesarea was the hub of Roman oppression; and the men who came to Peter, they were sent by a Roman centurion, a gentile named Cornelius. This is the outsider that Peter welcomes and includes in their community of faith – an outsider whose very way of life as a soldier resulted in Jewish captives at the time being thrown to wild animals, according to reports by the 1st century historian Josephus.

How does anyone find it in their heart to embrace such a man as Cornelius? How can anyone – even Peter – wrap his brain around the idea of talking about and sharing his faith to a Roman soldier and risking such an uncertain response.

How was it that Peter was able to step up and be this kind of an instrument of God, so as to embrace outsiders, people who follow none of the customs and practices of true believers?

Well, Peter has already given us the answer. "The Spirit told me to...," said Peter. "Who was I that I could hinder God?"

Who was I that I could hinder God? Have you ever thought about that for yourself? What are some of the ways that you – that I – might be hindering God, and how can we move beyond those ways of being?

Peter, in following God's lead, merely takes it one step at a time, and so should we. Peter trusts in God to show him the way, to provide the words he is to say, the actions he is to take.

"We entered the man's house," says Peter. "And as I began to speak," he says. And "the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning." Despite any fears or reservations Peter may have had

about speaking up, God clearly had something in the works that was just waiting for someone like Peter – maybe someone like you – to see it through.

And all it took was for Peter to begin to speak, for Peter to allow the Holy Spirit to flow through him, freely, despite any of his reservations, fears and doubts. Peter doesn't even tell us what he said – just that he began to speak.

Now God could have sent the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and his household apart from Peter. But God chose Peter – God chooses us – to be the instruments of his invitation, even when it takes a great deal of courage and risk; even when we're afraid to open our mouths, to speak about our faith.

Peter was not stingy with the Holy Spirit, and we shouldn't be either. We all have something to say about our faith life; our beloved church family – what they mean to us; our spiritual journey – how one day God stepped into our lives in a new way and stretched us and grew us in our faith.

And yet, what are some ways we become stingy with all that God has done for us and the power of the Holy Spirit that God has given to us? Perhaps you're afraid to speak about your faith with those outside the church?

What are you afraid of? What terrible outcome might we risk by stepping out and opening our mouth like Peter did, just having the faith that God's spirit might actually change the life another person, because of something we say or do?

After I had finished putting together this sermon last week and as I left the church Thursday evening, I saw a young couple walking up Maple Avenue with their kids in a stroller. I pulled up beside them. Told them I was with the church on the corner, and I asked them if they had a church, if they might want to visit with us sometime; that we have a great Children's and Youth Program.

The wife looked at the husband and said, "Go ahead and tell him." With which the husband said, "We're pastors, too." Turns out they just moved back to town and are starting a new church on Noland Road, similar to Assemblies of God, come September. But we might just see them here between now and then.

Like you, I was hesitant to speak to someone I didn't know about my faith. I thought, maybe they'll be uncomfortable – for us, surely we get uncomfortable. But ask yourself, isn't the risk of a little personal discomfort worth the experience of God working through you, God opening the way for another human being to perhaps grow in his or

her spiritual journey, maybe even become a new friend of First Presbyterian church?

Perhaps you're afraid you are not as good a follower of Christ as you could be, so who are you to lead someone else in their faith journey.

Well, you're here, aren't you? Something brought you to this place? Something brings you back week after week – give or take a Sunday in between. Whatever it is that brings you back, share that with someone in your life this week, someone who might enjoy visiting our community of faith on a Sunday morning – even if they are pastors starting their own church. Maybe someone you see on the street or in your workday or at school might want to check out our LOGOS Youth Program this fall, or come for Vacation Bible School this June, or Traveling Day Camp this July – either with a young person or as an adult volunteer.

You know what it is that you get out of being a part of this church, in your heart of hearts you know. Let's not be stingy with that. All it takes is bringing it from our heart of hearts up our vocal cords and out onto our lips, just like Peter did. "As I began to speak," he said, "the Holy Spirit fell upon them."

Just begin to speak. Surely we can do as much, with God's help – regardless of what it might take for us to get up the courage and to risk whatever it is we fear about putting ourselves out there in the world.

Don't worry; the world can take it. And more importantly, when we speak out in faith, God can use it – use us – to bless the lives of others.

Before we wrap this up today, let's take just a few minutes to look at some of the surprising ways God might use us and our experiences to bless the lives of others.

According to a WebMD article titled Spirituality May Help People Live Longer,² studies have shown that "people who attend religious services or who feel they are spiritual experience lower levels of depression and anxiety; display signs of better health, such as lower blood pressure and fewer strokes; and say they generally feel healthier." According to lead researcher Harold G. Koenig, M.D., of Duke University Medical Center, religious people are 28 percent more likely to live longer than people with no faith practices. In other words, you get your life out of it!

² <http://www.webmd.com/balance/features/spirituality-may-help-people-live-longer>

Now why would we be stingy about sharing something like that? "Even people who don't describe themselves as religious," says the article, "probably can benefit from some of the lessons uncovered by research into spirituality and aging." "The message isn't 'Go back to church and you'll live a long time,'" says one researcher,³ "but (rather) stay connected with people on your own wavelength." And what better wavelength to tap into than one that connects us to God?

The article goes on to give some ways, people can connect to God that we can actually share with others, such as, quote, "joining small prayer groups even if they're not associated with any church, trying personal meditation, writing your life story, searching inside for personal meaning in life as you age and face death, remaining optimistic about life even if age and illness take their toll, and forging social connections with family, friends and others."

Which for us, begs the question, what are we really sharing with others when we share our faith. Is it the church, like they have to come to our church and subscribe to our brand of Presbyterian Christianity?

Or should we be more focused on meeting people where they are on their spiritual paths, and then, using our experiences, help them grow as the Spirit may lead us to do, and empower them to achieve? Yes, we would all love to have more people join us in this community of faith – and we have!

Within the past 3 years, more than 33 families or individuals have either joined or returned to this church, or our visiting with an eye toward membership – (see the bulletin board outside the Sanctuary today for a list of some of these folks). Just like you, these people have found their way to First Church for a reason, and they, too, return because we do get our life out of this.

As we go through the days and weeks ahead, let's not be stingy with what God has given to us. Let all of us – each and every one of you, and me, too, – let us all freely and courageously speak to another human being about our faith. And then leave the outcome to God.

Because when it comes to our faith, we are all called to be free Spirited. And that means free of any of the fear and reservations that hold us back, and free of any doubt and disbelief about what God can achieve through us. And all this takes is for us to fight the impulse to hold back in fear and instead step forward and merely speak out in faith. One person, this week and see what God does.

Amen.

³ Gerontologist Harry R. Moody, Ph.D., author of *The Five Stages of the Soul*.

