

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC
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John 5:1-14, Acts 16:9-15
Powerful Spirit Calls

I'm gonna sing when the Spirit says sing, I'm gonna pray when the Spirit says pray, I'm gonna move when the Spirit says move, and obey the Spirit of the Lord!

The Spirit is calling powerfully in our stories. Did you hear it? The Spirit is calling powerfully in our church. Do you hear it? We are being offered a vision. We have only to listen, imagine, and take action. Now you may be thinking, Pastor, just where do you see that? "I'm gonna sing when the Spirit says sing, and obey the Spirit of the Lord!"

Let's go to the pool at Bethesda shall we? There we find a man waiting for the Spirit of God to stir the healing waters. Then, if he can just get in the water before anyone else, he will be cured. Jesus comes along, and without stirring up the water, or putting him in it, or even touching him, the man is made well. All Jesus does is ask him, "Do you want to be made well? Well then get up!" The Spirit of God called in such a powerful way that the man responds. There you go!

And then Paul, through the Spirit of God sees a vision. He is diverted from Asia, instead going in the opposite direction to Macedonia. After hearing him preach, Lydia and her family are baptized and invite Paul to their home. The Spirit of God called in such a powerful way that Paul and Lydia responded. There you go!

So in both stories and in our church we are being offered a vision. We have only to listen, imagine, and take action. Got it? Not quite yet?! “I’m gonna pray when the Spirit says pray, and obey the Spirit of the Lord!”

Well perhaps some other stories will help. There is a UCC church that went through a process of discernment about where God was calling them to go. What they heard God saying was that they were called to serve people, and to serve people living on the street, people who were hungry and hopeless. An inner city ministry. The problem was that they were a suburban church, located in a residential area where there were none of those people.

They had a wonderful building- finally fully paid for. They had a great group of people. And they had a call from God to serve. But they had no way to serve those inner city people because they were located in the wrong place! Called to an inner city ministry, what was God thinking?!

But who was it located in the wrong place? After prayer, they decided that if they could not serve the people from the location of their building, they needed to change their location. They sold the building. They picked up, moved to the inner city, and are now witnesses to God’s love, in ministry with the people God called them to serve.

When they moved, they put up a big sign on the side of the building so everyone would know where the people had gone. It said, “The Spirit said move

so we Did!” “I’m gonna move when the Spirit says move and obey the Spirit of the Lord!”

A second story. I went to a conference where I saw a T shirt that really intrigued me. The woman wearing it was sitting so I couldn’t quite read it. But I just had to see what it said. She probably thought I was one of the rudest people, staring at her back and her chest! When I finally got to ask her what her shirt said, then I had to ask what it meant. On the front her shirt said, “Jesus has left the building” and the back it says “and we follow!” It seems her church has a new tradition. You will not see them worshipping in their building every Sunday. Instead, one Sunday a month they take their hands, hearts and bodies out to the community and serve God’s people out there. “And obey the Spirit of the Lord!”

In all these stories, the people are doing things differently because they have listened to powerful call of the Spirit. The man at the pool at Bethesda thought he had to wait for the Spirit to stir the water and immerse himself. Waiting didn’t work. Instead Jesus knew the Spirit was working all around him. Jesus looked at, talked to and encouraged the man, perhaps the first person who had ever done so. Jesus saw him and offered him the dignity of relationship. And the man’s life was transformed. For the first time in 38 years, he took up his mat and walked.

Paul listened to the Spirit and changed his course completely. Then he went, not to Jews in the synagogue, not to the male leaders in the town, but to the river,

to Gentiles, and to women! Lydia a businesswoman whose livelihood depended upon her reputation among the rich and powerful, risked it all to open her heart to the love of God. She not only embraces her new faith publicly, she invites two strange men into her home and starts the first church in Europe! They “obeyed the Spirit of the Lord!”

And so here we are my beloved brothers and sisters. Here we are beloved of God. Do you hear the powerful call of the Spirit?

How many of you have fruit trees? This week I visited First Day in Whittier, the program that helps people to transition from life on the street to life in community. They have a new initiative to teach people about healthy eating, so instead of sugary goodies and prepared foods, they invite donations of fresh fruit and vegetables. So I asked them, “what can the church do to support your ministry?” The response was, “Come to First Day and be with the people.”

You see, the Spirit is working all around us. If we can look at, talk to encourage people we may be the first person to ever do so. If we truly see them and offer them the dignity of relationship, then their lives and ours will be transformed. So how about taking a basket of fruit and going to be in relationship with people at First Day?

But perhaps you can't get all the way down to Whittier, or you don't know where First Day is, or perhaps inner city ministry is not your call. Well, can you

get here? Perhaps you don't have a lot of time. Do you have fifteen minutes once a week? Perhaps you don't have a lot of energy or skills or enthusiasm. Do you have a lap?

This week I went down to our Country Day School. It is only a few short steps or a little drive. They are open all week! And I sat and became a lap. Do you know the joy I was engulfed in? Do you know how much they would love to have you there? Do you know that the ministry to children is the ministry of heaven? Can you imagine how your presence can influence their lives about what church means and how God loves them?

Do you know what can happen if instead of waiting for all the children of God to come to us, we go to them? Will these things balance the budget or grow the church's numbers? May be not tomorrow. But then the things we have been doing aren't either. So today we have the opportunity to follow the Spirit where it leads and trust we God that we are going where we are supposed to be located. The point is we have to hear where the Spirit is calling most powerfully and go there. Jesus has left the building. Let's follow shall we?! "And obey the Spirit of the Lord!"