

Spirit of God! descend upon my heart

A Mennonite minister reflects on the Holy Spirit

Carol Penner

When I was sixteen, I learned to play one hymn on the piano. Since that time, whenever I sit at a piano I play that hymn. I chose the piece because I liked the tune, the words spoke to me, and it wasn't too hard to learn. In this way, "Spirit of God! descend upon my heart" has become a life-time prayer. George Croly wrote the poetry in 1854, and his words are still resonating in the corners of my life. I will use the verses of this hymn as guideposts in this reflection on the Holy Spirit.

Spirit of God! descend upon my heart.

*Wean it from earth, through all its pulses move.
Stoop to my weakness, mighty as thou art,
and make me love thee as I ought to love.*

This hymn has made the cut in many Mennonite hymnals. Mennonites sing lustily about the Holy Spirit, but I don't think we are as comfortable *talking* about the Holy Spirit. In my experience, Mennonites rarely hear people talking about the Spirit. We are way more comfortable talking about Jesus. Maybe it has something to do with humility. We are loath to point to someone and say, "She is filled with the Holy Spirit"; it might lead to pride! And we almost never claim to be filled with the Holy Spirit ourselves, because it sounds too self-aggrandizing and offends our Mennonite sensibilities.

I have been far more likely to hear, "We are following Jesus," "We are disciples of Jesus," or "I'm trying to do what Jesus would do." Any mistakes along the way are obviously our own fault; there's a margin for error when you are imitating someone. If we claim we are filled with the Holy Spirit, perhaps it seems harder to account for our actions, or lack of actions. It's tricky to strike a balance between admitting our own weakness and claiming the power of the mighty Spirit.

I think too that the Holy Spirit is something of a wild card, and Mennonites tend not to like to live on the wild side. In our collective history we've had leaders pop up who have claimed to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The results have rarely been good. How can you argue with someone who claims to have the Holy Spirit, who claims that the Holy Spirit is making him do something?

And yet, in spite of our cautiousness and reticence in talking about it, being filled with the Spirit is something we do believe in! It's something we are taught, we sing about it, preachers declare it formally from the pulpit, and it's right there in our confession of faith, if anyone cares to look that up. But as for the rank and file—we prefer to talk about Jesus.

As a young adult, I worshiped in a charismatic church several summers. Everyone who attended there spoke frequently of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was the common currency of the group: they expected that you would ask God for it and it would be deposited in your soul. You could ask specifically for certain gifts: speaking in tongues, prophesy, or the gift of healing, for example. You were expected to ask and God was expected to provide the gifts—and by all appearances, that was happening. It was a Spirit-filled place! I was amazed at how freely they talked about the Spirit: “The Spirit is moving today!” “She was filled with the Spirit!” “The Spirit spoke through him tonight.”

While I was fascinated by the power of the Spirit in that church, I also remember being afraid. There were certain gifts that I definitely did not want to have, and I saw that people were often given gifts for which they did not ask. I couldn't imagine standing up spontaneously in the middle of a church service and suddenly saying, “The Spirit has given me a word for our church.” That happened pretty regularly in these services. It just seemed too out there, way outside my comfort zone.

I ask no dream, no prophet ecstasies,
no sudden rending of the veil of clay,
no angel visitant, no opening skies,
but take the dimness of my soul away.

Years later, in reading an autobiography of Teresa of Avila, I came across similar hesitations. She dreaded certain gifts of the Spirit

and wished they would not be given. It was embarrassing for her, for example, when she was so filled with the Spirit that she levitated in church. But she had little control over how the Spirit was given.¹

For all my fears, I have found myself in pastoral ministry, where I regularly stand up and deliver a word for the church. I don't preface my sermon with the words, "The Spirit is saying . . .," but I do believe I've been given the gift to preach. When I was ordained, people laid hands on me and prayed that I would receive the Spirit. I think the people in my church are still praying for me, and I pray for them. Even if we don't often speak explicitly about the Spirit, we understand that we need the gifts of the Spirit in the church, and that they are given.

I have seen the Spirit giving gifts in surprising ways to the church. I remember being part of a tense congregational meeting. It had been going on for a number of hours, and people were

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emotionally wrung out. The issues we were speaking of were deeply felt and deeply painful. Many tears and some angry words had been exchanged.

A woman (let's call her Grace) spoke. I would probably have voted Grace least likely to say something helpful, as she was prone to long discourses that wandered away from the point at hand. In this situation, however, she spoke clearly, concisely, with power. Her

observation about where we were as a church was spot on, and we all realized it. She sat down.

Then a man stood up. He had a brain injury and was slow of speech. In his careful way of saying things, he also commented on who we were as a church and what we were about. A long silence followed these comments. There was nothing left to say that day. We closed the meeting with prayer and a feeling of renewed hope.

I think everyone at that meeting was following Jesus. We were given a special gift of hope in that dark time by two people the Spirit chose. We ask for light on dim pathways, and the Spirit provides it. The Spirit works not only through the educated and articulate people but also in the humblest and simplest people. The Spirit filled and breathed insight and words into people—

powerful, important words, which were accepted and received by an attentive community. Hearing is a gift of the Spirit too.

Teach me to feel that thou art always nigh.

*Teach me the struggles of the soul to bear,
to check the rising doubt, the rebel sigh;
teach me the patience of unanswered prayer.*

When I was on my knees being baptized, my minister held out his hand and said, “I extend to you the right hand of fellowship. May God grant you the Spirit from above.” That sentence, proclaimed

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by my minister—and which I have also said, extending my hand in fellowship to the one newly baptized—confirms our basic belief that we are indeed personally filled with the Holy Spirit. God is present with us in mysterious ways. As a community of faithful people, God is present with us through the Spirit in the people around us. They are the ones who help us with our struggles and doubts, they teach us patience.

In my work as a pastor I see the Holy Spirit filling people, filling me, in lots of different ways. There is still a margin for error. We are pretty permeable: the Spirit is given

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I’ve seen the Spirit as a divine spark, lighting the way, leading people in a certain direction, so that they go this way, not that way. They meet this person and not that person. They are in the right place at the right time to share a word, which is the word of God for someone. The Holy Spirit as a glimmer, half-seen, leading us in dark times. A hymn, taken up by chance, becoming a lifetime prayer—also the Spirit’s leading.

I see the Spirit working as the Great Unsettler. Old friends who have lived for many years with a terrible rift between them become unsettled about this division. They find themselves yearning for peace. A young adult, entrenched in a demanding university program, feels an unignorable urge to drop everything to go to

Africa to teach English for a year. A girl wants to fit into the social group with her friends but feels that being a Christian makes her different and unable to participate in some of their activities.

It's the Spirit as poison ivy, creating an itch that we feel compelled to scratch. Or perhaps the Spirit is giving us a thirst for

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what will save our life. But thirst can also be uncomfortable. For that matter, the Spirit as wind is a comfortable image for those who have never been caught in a hurricane. The Spirit is a mighty wind.

I see the Spirit at work as breath, a life force in situations where death reigns. A relationship between a mother and her adult daughter is lifeless as cement. The relationship weighs them both down; it's hard to walk

with cement shoes. After a shuffling journey, many decades long, after fervent prayers for release, the answer dawns in an astonishing way and a new relationship springs out of an old dead stump. Dry bones from the tomb are suddenly filled with breath, and grow flesh. The Spirit surprises us with resurrection.

In the churches I've served I've seen feats of strength that can only be described as the Spirit at work. People not hated, even when hateful reasons exist. People forgiven, even when forgiveness is not requested. Faith held onto in spite of years of doubt. People loved even when they have been entirely unlovable. When faith, hope, and love surpass the bounds of what is conceivable, the miraculous divine nature of the Spirit is in evidence. I see these transformations happening in the lives of people in my congregation.

Hast thou not bid us love thee, God and King?

All, all thine own, soul, heart, and strength, and mind.

I see thy cross, there teach my heart to cling.

O let me seek thee, and O let me find!

I had a vivid encounter with the Holy Spirit once when I was visiting a dying woman. This woman, whom I knew well, was bitter and opinionated. She was recalcitrant and grumpy to the end. She was dying with much unfinished business and many broken relationships. She was still clear in her mind, and relatives

were gathered in the hopes that some final peace might yet be found. She was refusing to see them. On my way to what I expected would be my last visit with her, I remember thinking that we needed a miracle. We needed the Holy Spirit to show up in a big way, to make some changes. We needed something like a mighty wind to change the course that had been set for long years. As I drove to the woman's house I prayed, "God, send your Holy Spirit down. We really need it here!"

My visit with her was similar to many other visits. Her voice was more feeble, but there was still the litany of complaints, the blame directed to everyone else. I asked her whether she would like to make peace with some of the people who had gathered. She declared that she had no unfinished business, that she had no apologies to make. She was lying in the bed, and I was sitting in a chair next to the bed. As I listened to her, a wave of frustration and even dislike washed over me, and a sense of hopelessness about lost chances. And then something happened.

I stumbled from the room and sat in the car, shaking. What had just happened? I had asked the Holy Spirit to show up, and the Holy Spirit had arrived. But it hadn't occurred to me that I was the one who needed to be changed.

It was like a whoosh, definitely a physical sensation. I was suddenly and completely filled with love for this woman. As I looked at

her, she was someone who was incredibly dear to me, so entirely loveable. I had been sitting beside the bed, but now I went to her and bent over her, and I put a hand on her forehead and prayed with her, a prayer of fervent blessing, wishing her well on her way. I kissed her good-bye, and she said, "Thank you, dear."

The nurse came and said that the time for our visit was over, because the woman was so weak. I stumbled from the room and sat in the car, shaking. What had just happened? I had asked the Holy Spirit to show up, and the Holy Spirit had arrived. But it hadn't occurred to me that I was the one who needed to be changed.

This was not a warm and comfortable experience. It was an excruciating experience, in which I became acutely aware of how far I sometimes am from God in the work that I do. So often performing the motions of ministry, but without the love that ministry requires. My own sin so often getting in the way. It was a

falling-on-your-knees-at-the-cross experience. I am thankful for the Spirit's chastising presence.

That experience, and others, less dramatic but of a similar nature, have made me less blithe and casual about invoking the Spirit.

Teach me to love thee as thine angels love,

*one holy passion filling all my frame;
the baptism of the heaven-descended Dove,
my heart an altar, and thy love the flame.*

I have always been captured by the image Gerard Manley Hopkins uses in his poem "God's Grandeur." After speaking of the brokenness of the world he ends with hope, "Because the Holy Spirit over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings." There is something entirely reassuring about God's presence, the Spirit's loving presence, moving over the deep.

The Spirit brings hope, even to a denomination as diverse as the Mennonite church. I see the Spirit at work like a river pushing the church in a certain direction. Elements of the church may speed along in narrow currents, anticipating the flow. Other elements are swirling around or even temporarily going the other direction. People filled with Spirit, groups of people, churches, around the country, around the world. Cooperating, competing, crying at cross-purposes, combining efforts to do considerable works of compassion. The river flows on. I like Martin Luther King Jr.'s thought, not originally about the Holy Spirit, but applicable: "The arc of moral history is long, but it bends towards justice." The church is a broad institution, but the Spirit is moving us toward love.

I am trying to find the words to speak of the Holy Spirit in congregational life. I am looking for evidence of the holy passion in my life and in the lives of others, and encouraging others to speak of the Spirit out loud. I am trying to be careful to speak of the Spirit's presence in a thankful and reverent way, avoiding the corrupting urge to speak of the Spirit in a proprietary way.

I am eager to see how the Spirit will work in our denomination in the coming years. The Spirit changes us, challenges us. I am excited by the rich diversity of the Mennonite family around the world. I am excited by the breaking down of barriers between

denominations, and the movement of people back and forth between different traditions. There is much to be learned about the Spirit from our charismatic brothers and sisters both inside and outside the Mennonite tradition.

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I think that Mennonites in the future will need to take risks with the Spirit, to trust ourselves to holy fire. As a Mennonite, I relate to Abba Lot in this story from the Desert Fathers: "Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, 'Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?' Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, 'If you will, you can become all flame.'"²² Abba Lot is doing everything by his strength, as far as he can, but his yearning is for something more. That's where the Holy Spirit comes in. Spirit of God! descend upon my heart.

Notes

¹ Teresa of Avila, *The Book of My Life*, trans. Mirabai Starr (Boston: New Seeds, 2007), 139.

² *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984, rev. ed.), 103.

About the author

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