



“Shut Up and Let the Spirit Speak”

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One day, when my daughter Lia had just turned six years old, we saw a bumper sticker on a mini-van that took us a few seconds to puzzle out. Once we understood what it said, we had a good laugh together because the eight short words painted a pretty clear picture of what our driving life together had been like ever since Lia learned to walk and load herself into a car. The bumper sticker said: “Get in. Sit down. Shut up. *Hold on!*”

For those who haven't had to load a small child into a car recently, let me just explain that from the perspective of modern California children who spend inordinate amounts of time in cars commuting to school and social activities, the car is not just a vehicle or means of transportation; it is, in fact, another room of their home. It is a kitchen/dining room where moms and dads, like human Gumbys, stretch their arms around seat backs, headrests, and gear boxes to hand you snacks and juice boxes, while driving, yes, 75 mph on the freeway. The car is also a TV room where you watch DVDs on 7-inch screens without your headphones on. And most importantly, the car is a playroom/library, filled to the gills with toys and books, all of which you must stop and examine in minute detail before you get in your car seat.

And for those who aren't aware of current California law, it is now illegal to leave your child in a car for any length of time. For obvious and important reasons, such as the tendency of children to fry at high heats, you can no longer lock your children in your car while you dash in to pick up a cup of coffee, stamps, dry cleaning, library books, or the bag of ice you desperately need for this evening's desperately-needed cocktails. You must take your children with you each and every time you exit the car, which for the typical California parent is about, oh, 47,000 times each day. And each and every time, the child has to stop and stand in the well of the back seat and pick up toy after toy to examine as if they've never seen it before or play with the various car buttons and knobs, or fish some uneaten snack off the seat to comment on its current state of biodegradation. You do the math: 47,000 x 365 days each year x the number of children you have been blessed with. It all adds up to this: bumper stickers that shout what all but the most sainted parents are thinking, “Get in. Sit down. Shut up. *Hold on!*”

Now, of course, when Lia and I first saw this bumper sticker, she was quick to point out, as she had learned both at home and in school, it isn't very polite to say "Shut Up!" And, of course, I noticed it didn't include my perennial admonition to "buckle up so mama won't get a ticket and have to go to jail." So we decided our family version would be: Get in, sit down, buckle up, and be quiet. But as everyone who has loaded a child 47,000 times understands, we have yet to see our "nice" version of the bumper sticker available for sale. I guess it just doesn't have the ring or the power of the original saying.

Now, as some of you know, next Sunday, June 6, is the last Sunday of my volunteer internship here at Eden Church as your Minister-in-Training. So, today is my last sermon in that capacity and I wanted it to be a very special sermon that encapsulated and expressed all of my experience as Eden's MIT, as well as showcase all that I had learned in my two-year Certificate of Ministry Studies program at the Pacific School of Religion, which I completed this month. Last fall, I carefully selected today's scripture from the three options provided by the Revised Common Lectionary and was enthused about my choice because it would allow me to make a detailed study of the Gospel of John and review the Christology and pneumatology (fancy word for study of the Holy Spirit) of the first century community that was its source. You can imagine my surprise when, after careful Biblical, historical, and literary exegesis, I realized today's Bible message basically boiled down to: "Get in. Sit down. Shut up. *Hold on!*"

Let me start with a confession, which is fitting because, as Pastor Arlene likes to say, church is a good place for confession. I have not until recently given much thought to the Holy Spirit. I feel empowered to say that because in my Lenten small group several other members mentioned a similar sense of disconnection to the concept of the Holy Spirit. We wondered together about who or what the Spirit was and why, given the omnipotent power of God and the moral leadership and saving grace of Jesus, a third aspect of the Godhead was needed or desired by the early Christians. In other words, when we have God and Jesus, why do we need the Holy Spirit?

Today's scripture from the Gospel of John provided me with an answer to that question that truly touched my heart and gave me a new way of thinking about the Holy Spirit. In this Gospel's account of his life, Jesus has a long conversation with his disciples after the Passover feast, before his betrayal and crucifixion. He tells them: I have bad news and I have good news. The bad news, of course, is that he will be betrayed by one of their own and that he will go where they cannot go, despite their repeated pleas that they be allowed to either follow him or to go ahead and prepare his place. The good news is that he will ask God to give them another companion, one who would be, depending on the translation of your Bible, their comforter, their advocate, or their helper. The New Revised Standard Bible uses the word "Advocate" and refers to the Spirit of truth. The original Greek word used for the various translations is "Paraclete," which translated etymologically means "called

to one's side." Regarding the one who would be called to their side in his absence, Jesus promised, starting in Chapter 14 of John and extending through today's scripture in Chapter 16, that this One would live with them forever, teach them all what Jesus meant, would testify for Jesus, prove the world wrong about sin, righteousness, and judgment, and would guide the disciples to the truth. In other words, the Paraclete would do for the disciples what Jesus had done for them during the course of his ministry and their discipleship—show them both the ways of the world and a better way to live. The Paraclete would also be their Comforter as they struggled to understand Jesus' death and absence from their lives.

Theologian Maya Fields Tyler, who gave last Sunday's Children's Gathering as a graduating confirmand, captured my own emotional response to this scripture beautifully by reminding the children of the ache they feel when separated from their parents and how holding a precious object of the beloved, like a well-worn pair of pajamas, can bring comfort and consolation. I believe now, as then, the Holy Spirit was sent by God to be our consolation at the absence of Christ in our time. But I also believe that Jesus promised the disciples so much more than consolation. Hear again the list of promises: teach them what Christ meant, testify for Jesus, prove the world wrong about sin, righteousness, and judgment, and guide the disciples to the truth.

Reflecting on this list of what the Spirit is supposed to do reminded me of those times in my career in government and consulting that I stumbled upon someone else's job description or work plan and suddenly realized that I was doing their job for them! The deeper I have gotten into religion, theology, and, in particular, Christianity, the more I have felt that I needed to defend or explain to the world what Jesus said and did and what the church founded in his name said and did, even when I myself can't see sense in it. For example, the other night on a late night comedy show, an erstwhile comic and reporter went to two different Christian organizations that evangelize using organized fighting, wrestling, and the demonstration of extreme feats of strength. I laughed along but wondered how on earth I would explain that to my non-Christian friends? I don't think I could have, but in the mere seconds available to him on national media, the Spirit lead the Christian proponent of organized fighting, despite the gruesome images of men voluntarily fighting behind him, to remind the world that Jesus condemned violence and that violence is about violating or victimizing someone other than yourself.

It is the Spirit's job to guide us and other Christians into new ways of understanding what Christ taught and the ways in which our world, with all its astounding array of cultural values that do and don't sync with our own, is wrong and in need of transformation. It is the Spirit's job to show us the truth in the cacophony of competing cultural values around us. And it is the Spirit's job to do the same in our personal lives.

Lately I've been challenged with figuring out how to go to seminary at the ripe old age of 48. I have a list of pros and cons, a set of decision-making criteria, and a

spreadsheet with 10 rows and 10 columns of numbers. I've been doing a lot of thinking and I still don't have an intellectual or emotional answer that satisfies all my questions. Today's scripture reminded me that Christ promised me, and all of us, that we would be guided to the answers to life's toughest questions—that we would be guided to the truth we need when we need it.

That's when it occurred to me that rather than trying to puzzle out the solution to my seminary questions and all the other questions that I struggle with about faith, life, and understanding Christianity, I should, as the bumper sticker says: "Get in. Sit down. Shut up. *Hold on!*"

Get In: In his time-honored classic *Celebration of Discipline: A Path to Spiritual Growth*, Richard J. Foster points out our ordinary method for finding answers to life's most persistent problems be they tough decisions, unhealthy, ingrained habits, or over-conformity to debilitating cultural values, is to launch a frontal attack. On your mark, get set, *engage willpower!* We resolve, we diet, we research, we fight, we set our will (and our spreadsheets) to work to find the truth we seek. And such methods rarely work, particularly when it comes to achieving long-term inner peace and satisfaction with our decisions. There just seems to be a natural limit as to how much willfulness can achieve on our behalf. Foster urges us to consider the gifts of the Spirit, placed within our hearts by Christ. Finding the truth, like transformation, Foster maintains, is an inside job.¹ We have to *get in*—into our own hearts—to start the process of finding spiritual answers and achieving change. Just as we tell our children to get in the car, God calls us to *get in* to a spiritual discipline we might hear and be guided by the Spirit.

Sit Down: As anyone who has tried to get their child into their car seat knows, telling a child to sit down is only part of what you want them to do. You want them to stop playing, put down whatever it is that they have in their sweet little hands, and *sit down* in their car seat so you can buckle them in. The same is true for tapping into spiritual gifts. The first step is to stop doing what you are doing, particularly if it isn't working for you. Stop playing on the Internet, stop talking on the phone, stop worrying excessively and, who knows, stop watching late-night comedy shows. (Gasp!) The bottom line is that we live in a culture where there is endless distraction and noise that diverts us from paying attention to the areas in our life where we need to focus and be open to guidance. There is also truth in the idea that sometimes our form of figuring something out isn't working for us and we need to put down our decision-making tools and start paying attention to the other sources of information available to us through our faith, however shaky we perceive it to be.

Shut Up: In the place of all this busy-ness, Foster suggests that we return to the spiritual practices of the ancients: meditation, prayer, solitude, and study. These are all very different practices with their own specific techniques to learn and master, but their commonality is that they all involve stopping whatever it is we are doing for a

¹ Foster, Richard J. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1978, p.4

time and engaging in stillness—if not an outright silence—that might make us receptive to hearing or knowing the guidance of the Spirit.

I know many of you in the Seekers groups are fans of Karen Armstrong, British theologian and author of scholarly books on God and religion and the recent creator of an international movement focused on the promotion of compassion. In her personal biography, *The Spiral Staircase*, Armstrong speaks of a time in her life when she was forced by unhappy career circumstances to *sit down* and *shut up*. She describes her experience in these words:

At first this silence had seemed a deprivation, a symbol of unwanted isolation. I had resented the solitude of my life and fought it. But gradually the enveloping quiet became a positive element, almost a presence, which settled comfortably and caressingly around me like a soft shawl. It seemed to hum, gently but melodiously, and to orchestrate the ideas that I was contending with, until they started to sing too, to vibrate and reveal an unexpected resonance.²

For Armstrong, this is the teaching of the ancients of every religion, not just our own. If they are correct, the path to greater insight and connection with truth and meaningfulness to our own lives will come through the periodic practice of staying our busy-ness and our tendency to keep our minds churning with ideas and considerations, whether we verbalize them or not.

Hold On: We tell our children to hold on because we never know what will happen once we are out on the open road. We have a general idea of where we are going, but we never know if we will have to stop unexpectedly, speed up to avoid a conflict, see a friend who needs a lift, or end up going somewhere unexpectedly because the opportunity presents itself. It's the same way with opening your life to the guidance of the Spirit. You never really know how the Spirit will answer your questions or where the Spirit will take you.

I love the story a pastor named Ben Bohren told at this year's NCNC Annual Gathering in Asilomar about being open to where the Spirit might take you. An elder at a small and struggling church began praying to God for answers to her church's flagging membership and money problems. The answer to her prayers came to her one night that she should go on a mission. At 75 years of age, she thought God had sent the right answer to the wrong address. She didn't want to go on a mission and couldn't see how that could help her struggling church. But she took the idea to the other church elders, all of whom were between the ages of 75 and 85 and, after thinking it over, they told her that they would go with her. They went to another state and worked in a soup kitchen, and returned to their church filled with excitement and a renewed sense of purpose and mission for their little church. Their enthusiasm was infectious and became the catalyst they needed to re-invigorate old members

² Armstrong, Karen. *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb out of Darkness*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, p. 283.

and draw new members to their church. None of which would have happened if the elder had not heeded the basic bumper sticker advice I'm offering today: "Get in. Sit down. Shut up. *Hold on!*"

My friends, Jesus promised us a counselor, a helper, an advocate. He promised us the One who would be by our side forever. He charged the Spirit to guide and lead us as individuals and as a church family. And the truth is, plain and simple, that we cannot be guided by the Spirit if we are trying to do the Spirit's job ourselves, nor can we hear the Spirit if we are too busy doing other things. We benefit from the Holy Spirit only when we have the spiritual discipline to open ourselves to the Spirit's fulfillment of Christ's promises to the disciples. So, my friends, get in, sit down, shut up, and let the Spirit speak in your life and in the lives of everyone you bless. Amen.