

There's an iron-clad rule that a sermon should only be about one thing. Today I am going to break this rule. Luckily, the Holy Spirit is evident in all our lessons today. And the Holy Spirit unites many things! The Holy Spirit connects us with God and each other. Helps us to know and do what is right. Even has an affinity for Virgin Marys [which we will be serving after our services today before we show you the status of the plans for our new church building]. OK, that's a really bad joke. But the Holy Spirit DID enable THE Virgin Mary to conceive Jesus. Read Luke 1:35 if you doubt me.

One of the many functions of the Holy Spirit is to empower people for specific God-given tasks. The Holy Spirit equips us to do these God-tasks, helping us to think of them in the first place as well as to carry them out.

There's an ongoing theological debate about whether the Holy Spirit is masculine or feminine. The debate hinges on the gender of the words in scripture used to talk about the Holy Spirit. Human words, human gender, making this argument an incredible waste of time. But, since today is Mother's Day, I've compiled something potentially more useful: the scriptural references that talk about God's feminine attributes. If you are interested, you can pick one up when you visit our Virgin Mary table after the service. Men: your day is coming soon!

I do, by the way, wish you ALL a Happy Mother's Day, those who ARE mothers and those who had or have nurturing mothers. For those who, perhaps, were not so nurtured by your birth mother, I trust that God has provided you with compensations, such as the love of Christian community.

As I said earlier, we have the Holy Spirit totally evident in all our lessons today. In our first lesson, we heard the story of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. As scripture says, Stephen was "filled with the Holy Spirit," explaining how he could see God and Christ Jesus in heaven. Can you imagine how infuriated the Jewish elite must have been when Stephen insisted that they had killed the Messiah?

What caught my attention is how Stephen emulated Jesus as he was being killed. Stephen forgave those who were murdering him, as they were literally stoning him to death, crushing him with their rock-hard hearts. Do you think Stephen was able to take this extraordinary action on his own? Do you think that Stephen was able by himself to even conceive of forgiving those crushing him with rocks? No! Stephen was filled with Christ's Spirit. SO why should we marvel that he was able to "channel" Christ Jesus while he was dying?

We don't often forgive those who kill our loved ones, much less those who murder US. The first time I heard something like this, Jesus was saying from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:24) Well, the Jewish leaders also didn't understand the consequences of their stoning Stephen. What they set in motion was a whole new impetus for bringing the Kingdom of God into reality here in creation. Early church historian Robin Fox said that the blood of the martyrs fueled explosive growth in the early Christian church. People admired the faith and lack of fear by those who they killed, beginning with Jesus and continuing here with Stephen.

Those who witnessed Stephen's murder had to have been impressed. Even today, occasionally, someone manages to respond in the name of Christ Jesus, as Stephen did, when their loved ones are murdered. And don't we all recognize those who do so to be truly extraordinary?

I've seen this several times only in my lifetime:

- The witness of an Amish community in 2006 when their children had been murdered.
- A few times the parents of murdered children testify at sentencing hearings and declare their forgiveness.
- The witness of an African Methodist Episcopal congregation in Charleston in 2015 when their members met evil there.

But I haven't personally heard about someone forgiving their murderer as they were being killed. I suppose this has happened—other people managing, with the Holy Spirit's help, to channel the forgiveness of Christ Jesus himself.

Of course, these are extreme examples. Most of us don't get tested in this way. But don't we each end up having to forgive God himself for death itself? Not murder, but plain old death? Some people are never able to forgive God—think that God should have devised a different plan, a better plan for creation.

This is where Stephen's OTHER channeling of Jesus on the cross comes into play. Stephen, like Jesus before him, quoted Psalm 31:5 as he was dying. "Into your hands I commend my spirit."

This was a new use of King David's psalm. David had been hiding for his life when he prayed these words. When Jesus prayed them from the cross, he wasn't expecting his life in this

world to be saved, but rather expressing his deep faith that all would be well on the other side of death. Jesus was telling us that the God of our creation is the God of our eternal salvation.

On a normal Sunday we would be done here. But the Holy Spirit does more than show us how to die well—the Holy Spirit shows us why we exist, how to live well to fulfill our God-purpose in life.

In the early 1990s I spent a day reading AIDS quilt panels on the National Mall—back quilt all fit on the Mall. Most panels were obviously made FOR someone by a loved one. Some, however, were made by the person with AIDS himself. Here’s an example:

My name is Duane Kerns Puryear [the panel said]. I was born on December 20, 1964. I was diagnosed with AIDS on September 7, 1987, at 4:45 pm. I was 22 years old. Sometimes it makes me very sad. I made this panel myself. If you are reading it, I am dead...

This is NOT “Into your hands I commend my Spirit,” is it? On the other hand, it also wasn’t the one panel there that I can’t—won’t—quote here in church that was pure, unremitted anger at we-who-survive.

Against these two examples I’ve shared one other on the front of today’s bulletin. This person—Michael—without words, shared his testimony of life-as-becoming, growing more and more into Christ’s Spirit. We commend “our” spirit to God, because “our” spirit really is God’s Spirit, if we’ve lived our lives for him.

Between our birth by infusion of Holy Spirit with our flesh, and our death when we relinquish our spirit back to God, our epistle tells us,

Present yourselves as building stones for the construction of a sanctuary vibrant with life, in which you’ll serve as holy priests offering Christ approved lives up to God.

Isn’t this an astounding passage to read on the day when we get the first peek at what our new church might be? We are to be the material with which our church is built. And the Holy Spirit will help us do whatever God calls us to do.

Into your hands, Lord Jesus, we truly do commend our spirit. Help us to live the life you would have us live before helping us to die the death we must die to be with you.

