

God knew exactly where the apostles were located and sent a special delivery: The Holy Spirit. *All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages* (Acts 2:4).

Moments later, they used this gift to speak about God's deeds of power to people from every nation. The Holy Spirit enabled this news to be delivered accurately to *Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs* (Acts 2:5-11). Quite a delivery system. No more hoping. No more waiting. Just accurate deliveries.

People in Jerusalem were amazed when the Spirit facilitated this kind of communication. The apostles were Galileans, after all - back-country followers of Jesus not known for their language skills or their experience with international communication. In fact, some residents of Jerusalem sneered and said, *They are filled with new wine* (v. 13).

Innovation will always be met with resistance, whether it's a Spirit Code or a postal code. In Ireland, many are protesting the new postal-code system, saying that it's intrusive and unnecessary. But the change is truly necessary since online retailers require precise addresses. Amazon.com refuses to "deliver to the oldest Patrick Murphy first," hoping they get it right on the first try.

At the start, the Spirit Code improved person-to-person communication, allowing the followers of Jesus to speak to people around the world. The deliveries that began on Pentecost are continuing today, helping Christianity to grow into a religion with a global reach and 2.3 billion adherents - the largest faith group in the world.

Which is really great news, because we need help in our walk of faith. For example, in his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul says that we *do not know how to pray as we ought* (v. 26). We don't know God's exact address, or how we should phrase our requests. But the Spirit Code helps our prayers to get to God. Paul tells us that the *Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words* (v. 26), giving us assistance with divine communication. With the Spirit Code in place, we have no more worries about confusing or misdirected prayers.

Left to our own devices, we simply do not know how to pray as we ought. We run the risk of being like the woman who prayed, "Lord, grant me the serenity to accept stupid people the way they are, courage to maintain self-control, and wisdom to know that if I act on it, I will go to jail." Probably not the way we want to pray.

So how do we know if we are using the Spirit Code as we should? We don't want our prayers to bounce from Murphy to Murphy to Murphy. Instead, we want accurate deliveries. First, we begin by accepting help. Our text says that *the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought* (v. 26). When we open ourselves to the help of the Holy Spirit, we find that our prayers move beyond our narrow personal agendas to the wider agenda of Almighty God.

And what do such prayers look like? According to Dutch theologian Hendrikus Berkhof, they include "thanksgiving for what God does; adoration for who he is; [and] losing oneself in his incomprehensible love." Thanksgiving. Adoration. Losing oneself in heavenly love. These are God-centered prayers, as opposed to self-centered prayers. The Spirit helps us to focus on God's divine agenda, instead of on our human desires.

But does this mean that we should not ask for help? Not at all. So, second, the good news is that God wants to assist us. Paul goes on to say, *that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words* (v. 26). The Spirit intercedes - which means the Spirit acts as a mediator between us and God, helping with our communication.

Theologian Berkhof lists the types of prayers that are an appropriate part of this divine-human dialogue: "Prayer for faith and forgiveness; prayer for strength in the fight of the faith; outcry because of the lostness of our existence; prayer for help in need; for wisdom to make right decisions; for submission and surrender when we see that our wills conflict with that of God's." No requests for lottery winnings. No serenity to accept stupid people the way they are. Instead, prayers for faith, forgiveness, strength, help, wisdom, submission and surrender. Such prayers are delivered directly to God, via the Spirit Code.

Third, the best of all, these prayers are answered. Paul promises that *the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God* (v. 27), which means that the Holy Spirit enables God's will to be done in the lives of all who pray to God. This does not mean that we get everything we want when we pray to God, but it does mean that we get everything we need - according to the will of God.

Last year, a group called American Atheists put up a billboard across from MetLife Stadium, where the Super Bowl was being played. Its message: Stop praying. "A 'Hail Mary' Only Works in Football" said the billboard. They wanted people to stop believing that prayer works - both fans who were praying for their team to win and the players who were asking God to help them get the ball into the end zone.

But these atheists fell into a misunderstanding that is shared by many religious people - namely, that prayer works by changing outcomes. Instead, prayer changes the people who pray, making them more peaceful and accepting and aligned with the will of God. Prayer doesn't change the heart and mind of God, but it can change the hearts and minds of humans.

One of the most well-known modern prayers is the Serenity Prayer, central to the recovery from addiction being achieved in thousands of 12-step groups: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference."

Notice that God is not being asked in this prayer to heal anyone miraculously. Instead, God is being asked to give serenity, courage and wisdom to people so that they can become well. As an Al-Anon book says, "We turn to the God of our understanding for the attributes necessary to live life more fully."

Although the American Atheists might scoff at God, they cannot deny that millions of people have become sober through 12-step groups. In each of these groups, the Serenity Prayer is said in order to change the hearts and minds of people, not God. Prayer does work, in ways that align us with God's desire for healing and wholeness in human life.

A prayer for help in a time of need is always going to be heard by God and answered. We may not get the answer that we want, but we will be given the answer we need, in accordance with the will of God. Accurate delivery is guaranteed, according to the Spirit Code.

Prayer: Glorious Trinity make your presence known in this place through our worship, our prayer, the reading of your Word. Father, Son, Holy Spirit within whose unity lies all that is you: perfect love, justice, peace and power: as we gather here today, your body, your church throughout this world, fill our outstretched hearts with your spirit; encircle us with your love. Make yourself known to us in new ways, exciting ways, challenging ways. Empower us. Inspire us, Glorious Trinity. Amen.

Sources:

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Spirit Code

Pentecost Sunday, May 24, 2015

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Romans 8:22-27

"Deliver to the oldest Patrick Murphy first." That's been the practice in the Irish post office for many years. If you write a letter to Patrick Murphy in Abbeyfeale, County Limerick, your message might not get to the right man. In fact, it could pass through several other guys with the same name.

Towns in many parts of rural Ireland don't use house numbers. Some addresses even lack street names. And unlike the rest of Europe, they don't have numbers called postal codes - what we would call ZIP codes here in the United States.

So when a 40-year-old man named Patrick Murphy moved to Abbeyfeale, he became the third Patrick Murphy in the neighborhood. None were related. All had different homes. But their addresses were exactly the same. The postman first delivered mail to the Patrick Murphy who had lived in the village for the longest time. Then he would pass it on.

"My neighbors would get it first," said the new Patrick Murphy. "They'd have a good read, and they'd go, 'No it's probably not us.'" Not the most efficient system.

Now the Irish government wants to end mail delivery confusion, so it's instituting its first postal-code system. It will be more specific than our American ZIP codes, which can cover an entire town. Even more exact than the system in the United Kingdom, which can cover more than a dozen homes. In Ireland, the system will assign an individual number to every home and business.

No more letters bouncing from Murphy to Murphy to Murphy. No more residents having to experience in their postal system the truth of the verse from Romans, "If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (v. 25). No more hoping. No more waiting with patience. Instead, accurate deliveries.

Today is Pentecost, the day when the first followers of Jesus were all together in Jerusalem. Suddenly, "from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting" (Acts 2:2).