

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

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Pentecost Sunday

I Corinthians 12:3-13

## On Fire!

So I read something quite compelling this week. A pastor, Bill Carter, suggests **that the only church worth having, the only church worth belonging to, is a charismatic church.**

And he tells of a time when he was in a Christian bookstore. A customer learned from a sales clerk that he was a pastor. She turned to him and said, "I'm new in the area. I'm looking for a church. But it has to be a charismatic church."

Bill replied, "You ought to come and worship with us. We have a charismatic church."

She took a second look at him and said, "You can't be serious."

"Oh, yes, I'm quite serious."

She asked, "Do you have faith healings?"

"We probably do, but we don't make a big deal out of it. After all, it's a charismatic church."

She said, "I'm not sure I understand. Do people stand up in worship services and speak in tongues?"

"No," he said, "that's not quite how it goes for us. Sometimes at a congregational meeting, someone will go on about things that nobody else can understand. But they're not speaking in tongues; they're just explaining the budget."

She said, "I thought you said it was a charismatic church."

He said, "It is."

"Then do you have any strange manifestations of the Holy Spirit?"

"We have a few quirky church members, if that's what you mean."

"I thought you said you were part of a Pentecostal church."

He said, "No, no, we're not Pentecostal. We're Presbyterian."

She said, "Well, if you're not a Pentecostal, you certainly can't be a charismatic!" Then stomped away in a huff.

Well, both Pastor Carter and I would disagree with her. Yes, a church can be Presbyterian AND charismatic. Yes, a church can be both Congregational and charismatic. And I do agree with him: **that the church in its truest expression, the church at its best, is a charismatic church.**

I wonder what you think of when you imaging a charismatic church....

The charismatic church I have in mind I NOT going to look like the one the woman in the bookstore envisioned. Our lesson from Corinthians gives us the charismatic church I have in mind and which we should try to be like.

The Context. The church Paul was writing to was a troubled congregation. There were probably only fifty members in the church at Corinth, but they were at one another's throats. They were divided into political factions. They were debating sexual ethics. They were fighting about who should receive the Lord's Supper and who should not. They were suing one another in court. They were bowing before the shrines of their culture. They were defending their actions with slogans and bumper-sticker theology. To top it off, some of the church members insisted that they were more spiritual than some of the other members.

Paul addresses all of these problems in this letter. One of the final items on his list is the business of spiritual one-upmanship. That is what he begins to address in chapter 12.

The Corinthians wanted to know about "spiritual things." The true church, says Paul, is a "charismatic" church, a gifted church. The word "charisma" (Greek) means gift.

And when Paul uses this word, it is always plural: not merely "charisma," a single gift, but "charismata," a variety of gifts. No specific spiritual experience is better than all the rest. There is not one expression of the Spirit which is more charismatic than all the others.

In this way, the Holy Spirit is more generous than any individual can know. The Spirit touches different people in different ways, creating all kinds of different experiences.

Paul can't deal with "spiritual experiences" without talking about "gifts of the Holy Spirit." And he can't talk about "gifts of the Holy Spirit" without talking about the Trinity.

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.*

Spirit, Lord (Son), and God the Father: that's the Trinity. Though we usually we say them in the reverse order: God the Father, God the Son/Lord, and God the Holy Spirit.

"There are varieties of service but the same Lord." The one way to tell whether a spiritual gift or experience has come from the Holy Spirit - and I mean the only way to tell - is whether that gift or experience is in service to Jesus the Lord.

If it truly comes from God, then it continues in the life shown in Christ's incarnation: sharing his power, serving the needy, speaking his word, suffering in the shadow of the world's brokenness, and giving life as he gave his life. There is no true life of the Spirit apart from the life of Jesus.

And because the source of the Spirit is God, the Father of Jesus Christ, he can say, "There are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone." All things come from God. All things are activated and energized by God, and to God all things shall return.

Paul points us beyond our little bitty activities to the grand scheme of what God is doing in the world. We cannot talk about gifts of the Spirit without talking about serving Jesus Christ. And we cannot talk about serving Jesus Christ without considering the God who has first called the world into being, and who will finally reclaim all things, in everyone.

All this is to say that, in the kingdom of God, there is no distinction between personal life and public life. There is no separation of "spiritual things" from the matters of this world, whether they be family life, local economy, national politics, global suffering, or even church life. God works in all things, making all things new, moving us to God's great, final day of redemption.

I have known people in every church I've served who believe that the pastor is the one who should deal with "spiritual" matters, and the parishioners are the ones who take care of the business of the church; such that the pastor should not be involved in the administrative life of the church.

This thinking misses one of the central tenets of the Christian faith – that God came to earth, becoming human – one of us – to show that He does indeed have something to say and to do with our earthly lives. And in the sending of the Holy Spirit – we receive gifts of teaching, administration, caring for others, feeding and clothing those in need – and EVERYONE receives them.

To expect that your pastor will NOT get deeply involved the ACTUAL daily life of our church compartmentalizes the Christian faith (and me!) and keeps us at a distance. To disconnect our spiritual/faith lives, from our ACTUAL daily lives should NOT be possible. And if it is, we have some growing to do.

The Holy Spirit is the great connector – connecting people, connecting the parts of our lives that seem so disparate.

And the Holy Spirit is the great Activator! (v.6) Though I'm not sure "activates" is quite the right translation of that word – which in the Greek is *energo* – from which we get our word energy. The root *ergo* means work (ergonomic – it works well).

The Holy Spirit is our energizer, our motivator, our inspiration.

Think of it like this.

We talk about someone being "in" a particular field of study or career.

She's in medicine; he's in teaching.

Meaning that is what they do during the week, how they make enough money to enjoy themselves the rest of the time.

But if we say they are "into" these things, that is another story. "Into" means something more like total immersion. They live and breathe what they do. They take it home with them nights. They can't get enough of it.

Just listen to the difference.

He's in teaching.

He's into teaching.

To be "into" books means that just the sight of a signed first edition of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland sets your heart pounding. To be "in" books means selling them at Barnes and Noble.

Along similar lines, the Bible speaks of believing "into" rather than believing "in." In English we can perhaps understand the distinction best by using either "in" or no preposition at all.

Believing in God is an intellectual position. It need not have more effect on your life than believing in Freud's method of interpreting dreams or in any scientific or economic theory.

Believing God is something else again. It is less a position than a journey, less a realization than a relationship. It doesn't leave you cold like believing the world is round. It stirs your blood like

believing the world is a miracle. It affects who you are and what you do with your life – like believing your house is on fire or somebody loves you.

We believe **in God** when for one reason or another we choose to do so.

We **believe God** when somehow we run into God in a way that convinces us He is at work. And those are a good start on the way to **being into God**.

Because when we're into God, we'll know joy and peace beyond measure.

When the Holy Spirit is our energizer, we'll be so on fire for the common good

that the hungry will be fed – by us;

the poor will receive a boost – by us;

the sad and suffering will be comforted – by us;

the lonely will find a friend – in us.

I'm glad you're here, in church – but are you INTO church?

And as a church – what are we into?

Are we into God?

Are we into serving and growing and learning and loving?

May the Holy Spirit energize us to be on fire and into Him.

Amen.