

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples as they stood in a crowd of people from all over the known world. The “rush of wind” reminds us of the first Creation story, where the Spirit of God hovered over the void. The flames that descend on the disciples are evocative of the pillar of fire that led the Hebrew people through the wilderness. Just as God had covenanted with the people of Israel with the gift of Torah, now God creates the Church with the gift of the Holy Spirit. And what does the Spirit do that day? It empowers the disciples to speak to those people *in their own languages*. The Holy Spirit does not empower the members of the crowd to understand the disciples’ Aramaic. It does not erase their differences. The people all stay distinct from each other, but the disciples reach them as they are—different people, different gifts, but the same Holy Spirit. And the church is born, to carry on the work of Jesus, to make manifest the reign of God here and now.

The section from Paul’s letter to the Galatians describes what a community formed by the Spirit looks like. The “vice list” is a list of qualities that are self-oriented, that advantage the individual over others. The list of “gifts of the Spirit” names qualities that will bring you together with people who are not like yourself, that motivate one to look for what’s best for everyone. “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” Paul’s not talking about mortifying your physical body, or maintaining some Manichean kind of purity. “Living by the flesh” means placing your own desires and priorities over those of others. Crucifying the flesh, or living by the Spirit, is looking out for one another and working out what will be best for everyone, with appreciation for all their differences. The community is sort of the workshop for the soul, because our spiritual formation happens as we actively love and respect those from whom we differ. Paul doesn’t give the Galatians any

specific advice; they're going to have to work out their disagreements one at a time. But if they are guided by the Holy Spirit, they will work out their disagreements or differences, not by forcing a sameness but by commitment to each other *with* their differences.

Let me make this more concrete. An old episode of "The Moth Radio Hour" includes a story by Daniel Sperling<sup>1</sup>, who joined the service after graduating from law school because he wanted to serve his country and it was the Great Recession and he couldn't get a job. He realized he had made a terrible mistake, but it was too late to back out, and he was deployed to Iraq in 2010. His unit was stationed at a small outpost south of Baghdad, it was 115 degrees outside, and he was the lawyer so nobody liked him because he was the one who told them they couldn't do what they wanted to do. Even though combat operations were over, their bases got shelled every night, and they couldn't shoot back. After about five months of this, everyone on the base was perpetually scared.

The regimental command decided to do something about it. They sent out a questionnaire to every trooper on the base to gauge unit morale. Some of the questions were really basic, like "are you thinking of hurting yourself or others," or "are you getting enough sleep?" But one question was "Do you have a spiritual support network?" Sperling was not a religious person, so he checked the box "no" and handed in the survey.

The next day there was a knock on the door of his containerized housing unit. It was the regimental chaplain, Maj. Claude Brittian. Major Brittian was a Black Baptist pastor from Georgia. The chaplain said to him, "Brother Daniel, I notice that you are of the Jewish faith, and you said that you do not have a spiritual support network. Would you like my assistance?" (doesn't remember telling anyone he was Jewish, but he knew I was a lawyer from NY so he

could've put 2 + 2 together) "I didn't think I needed help, but here was this man standing in my doorway smiling at me, *offering me the only kind thing that anybody had offered me the entire time that I was there*, and who was I to say No to a Baptist pastor who outranked me?" So he said yes, I would like some help. The next day a box showed up at his door. It had four yarmulkes, a box of Hanukkah candles, a dreidel, and a pamphlet entitled "Judaism: Customs and Practices." He didn't feel like he needed this stuff, but he was touched by the gesture.

A month later the chaplain approached him again and said, "Brother Daniel, I have found that there are other Jews who are living on this outpost. Would you like to get together with them on Friday night for Shabbat services?" He wasn't too sure. He wasn't a very religious person and, he thought, "something about my people's history told me that we shouldn't put all the Jews together in one place," but this man was smiling and offering him a kindness, and he didn't want to say No. So on Friday night he went down to the post chapel.

It was a multi-use chapel. There were crosses and Christian iconography everywhere. Only one of the three Jews on post spoke Hebrew. The chaplain's assistant had never seen a Shabbat service before and was very curious, so he stayed off to the side and watched. "We got through the service, we said the prayer over the candles and over the challah, and we were about to say Goodnight when the chaplain's assistant jumps up and says, 'Wait, Jews, there's more. Follow me.'" In the back of the chapel there was a closet and in the closet were 16 glistening bottles of purple Manischewitz wine. The chaplain's assistant said, "The service isn't over until you've said the prayer over the wine and you've all had a drink." As a lawyer, Sperling had to object: "General Order Number specifically prohibits imbibing intoxicating beverages in a deployed environment." The chaplain's assistant said, "No, Lawyer, you're

wrong. There's an exception to that policy for Jews on Friday nights, when you can have one glass of Manischewitz wine with Shabbat services."

So they raised their glasses, they said the prayer, they all had a drink, and because they'd been so abstinent for six months, it went right to their heads. Sperling says, "I had found my spiritual support network." The alcohol and the fellowship really helped, but he says that wasn't enough to get them through the pain of a year-long deployment. "What really helped much more than that was knowing that there was somebody out there who was watching out for us, helping us find the spiritual support network that I didn't know that I needed."

He went home, and later heard that the chaplain had passed away, only in his early 50s. A lot of people came out to remember him because Sperling had not been the only one he'd helped on that base. "So now on Friday nights when I drink wine, I drink to the kindness and the memory of a Baptist pastor."

Did Pastor Brittian know a lot about Judaism? Possibly not. Did Pastor Brittian have just the right resources for Jewish soldiers on base? Clearly not. Was Pastor Brittian motivated by love for the people on base whoever they were? Yes, he was. And my guess is that he trusted the Holy Spirit to compensate for his clumsiness or his inadequacy; he let himself be guided by love. Daniel Sperling, a Jewish lawyer from New York, was not Claude Brittian's natural constituency, and was in fact not a typical member of the armed services. But Brittian did not feel any need to change Sperling or to question whether he belonged. And improbably enough, his ministry was exactly right. "On Friday nights when I drink wine, I drink to the kindness and the memory of a Baptist pastor." Is that so far from an act of worship, a recognition of God's gracious presence? That's exactly what it is.

Love is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which created the church on the day of Pentecost. At bottom, we are simply called to be kind, and let the Spirit be our guide. It's complicated in the moment, especially when our differences feel profound, but clearly God wants us to be different from one another, and clearly we know God best when we come together anyway.

Gracious God, close to us as breathing and distant as the farthest star, we give you thanks for your many gifts to us; but, above all today, we give you thanks for the gift of grace, the gift through which the Apostle Paul reached out to the people in Galatia and a gift with which you reach out to us through Jesus Christ and each generation. By that grace, O God, transform us, renew us, and call us again to be a people of your purpose, children of your righteousness. We pray this in the name of Christ. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://themoth.org/dispatches/gather-together>