

**Sermon: On Being a Vessel**  
**Scripture: Luke 6:24-30**  
**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**  
**Date: February 14, 2010**

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Believe it or not, this Wednesday Lent begins, the 6 weeks of journeying towards Easter. But to celebrate it right, before we enter into the penitential season of Lent we should all have a big bash of a party along with New Orleans on what is known as Mardi Gras or Fat Tuesday or previously as Carnival. Here in the greater Burlington area we are reminded of the post-Christian culture or maybe some would say even anti-Christian culture we live in because the Mardi Gras parade has been utterly divorced from it's origins and falls smack in the middle of Lent.

But the original idea of Mardi Gras was to have one last night of livin' it up, eating fatty foods and dressing up in regalia and dawning masks and imbibing spirits without limit because the next day was Ash Wednesday when we are reminded of our mortality and we begin to strip away our indulgences, acknowledge our sins and waywardness, ask for forgiveness, make amends and make an effort to get back on track.

Tonight we have our Confirmation class with about 13 youth of families connected with the church and tonight's topic is the Holy Spirit. In previous sessions, we talked about what we are referring to when we use the word "God" and we talked about a starting place for the Christian religion which is that something is not quite right in our lives and in the world, which the youth didn't need any convincing of! And we talked about one of the proofs of or evidence for God is in the very fact that we have a concept of that things are not quite right in ourselves and our world which suggests that there is some higher rightness that we have a sense of and innately desire. Then last month we talked about the role of the Hebrew people and Jesus especially in our understanding of how we get back in right relationship and since we've addressed the first and second person's of the trinity, tonight we are on to the third person: the Holy Spirit.

We are using the image of our human selves as vessels. I think it's a helpful way to think of ourselves. It's a bit counter-cultural to think in this way, though, because it seems the more common image we have of ourselves is as autonomous, self-contained, free-agent, individuals who can determine our lives as we see fit. It can thus sound offensive to some ears to suggest that more, in fact, are we vessels for some reality

beyond us. But know that this is what we are teaching your children – that we are vessels for spirit. Now this can be the Holy Spirit, with a capital “H” and a capital “S”, otherwise known as the third person of the Trinity, that aspect of God that is referred to as breath or wind or presence throughout the scripture and that was particularly manifest in Jesus, or... we can be vessels for some lesser spirits.

In Galatians, the apostle Paul gives us a list of the fruits of the Spirit, with a capital “S”: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). And elsewhere in Paul and in the Christian tradition we add wisdom, understanding, courage, and awe or reverence. These are the spiritual qualities that we are called to, or you might say, *created to* embody, to en flesh in our lives. These are the qualities of “when things are right”, in contrast to our sense of things in our lives and our world, not being quite right. We don’t conjure these realities, these fruits, up from within ourselves really, they exist with or without us. But we can be the vessels of these realities and our religion teaches that, in fact, is how we are created to be.

However, with a nod to America ideology, there is also more to it. We aren’t completely just empty shells to be filled with this or that, there really is a self, an I, that is a free creature, has some control and can be a creator in his/her own right. And the light side of this, the gift of it, is that we can freely choose to love and to foster peace and to be generous. But as you can also guess, there is the shadow-side of this reality which is that because we are free we can also block the fruits of the Spirit from flowing through us. We don’t have to be loving and kind and generous and in fact we can block those qualities and instead embody hatred and meanness and stinginess. The shadow sides of the fruits of the Spirit can be represented by what the Christian tradition has called the 7 deadly sins: greed, lust, wrath, sloth, envy, pride and gluttony. Our terrible and wonderful freedom makes it possible for us to be vessels of the Holy Spirit or vessels of such lesser spirits.

Now this is relevant to our approaching the carnival of Mardi Gras and the penitential season of Lent. And I am NOT suggesting that the decadence of Mardi Gras represents the lesser spirits and the austerity of Lent represents the higher Holy Spirit. That’s kind of a prevalent but problematic Christian perspective that it hands all the fun over to the devil, so to speak, and makes God into some severe and joyless tyrant. JOY is

one of the central fruits of the Spirit which is expressed well at Mardi Gras and if we are not careful Lent can be a time of glumness and stinginess of spirit that doesn't serve God at all.

But the spiritual "work" that we are invited into during Lent, see it as a time to address habits and patterns that are problematic in your life or as a time of penitence and getting right with people, or as a time of taking on a new or renewed spiritual discipline like prayer or meditation or scripture reading, but the whole idea is to become conscious of and ideally change those ways of being in yourself and in your world that are less than whole, less than loving, less than generous. In other words, how are you blocking yourself from being a vessel for the HOLY Spirit and how are you being a vessel for less-than-holy spirits? That's what we want to become conscious of and to seek to change. And then on the positive end, how are you already being a vessel of the Holy Spirit and how do you honor and foster those things in your spirit and in your life?

We could say that Jesus on the mountain top that day with Peter and the others was revealed as the pure vessel that he was for the Holy Spirit and he was radiant as a result and able to be an agent of healing immediately after that when he was confronted with a sick boy. Peter didn't understand this radiant flow of Spirit through the vessel of Jesus and he wanted to capture it by putting up a shrine in honor of it. He wanted to institutionalize or bottle the Spirit, which was a desire that came from some lesser spirit apparently, since the voice of God basically tells Peter to shut up and listen to Jesus. "Just listen to him. That's all I ask of you!"

And this speaks of a final point that I want to make about what it means to be a vessel of the Holy Spirit versus being a vessel of other lesser spirits. And it's held in this notion of flow. Could it be that a good indicator that we are opening as a vessel to Spirit is that it remains dynamic, fluctuating, moving in and around and through us and towards others and conversely whenever we sense ourselves clenching down, wanting to define things too rigidly, hold things too tightly to ourselves, be the authority, when the "I" becomes the destination rather than the community or the world, then we can be pretty sure that we are being vessels for something less than the Spirit with a capital "S". On the mountain top Jesus was filled with the radiance of the Spirit and his immediate

response to that was not “LOOK AT ME, I’M RADIANT!!!” but to walk right down that mountain and to allow that Spirit to flow through him for the good of a sick child.

Could it be that our purpose is to be a vessel through which can flow the Holy Spirit of God out into the world? May the season of Lent this year give us all an opportunity to become conscious of how the flow of Spirit is blocked in our lives, may it be a time of working at clearing away the obstructions to God so that resurrection can occur through our own flesh and bone.... Amen.