

Message: “Spiritual Things”

There’s this guy who interests me. His name is Jimmy. Who do you think of when you imagine someone named Jimmy? A boy down the street riding his bike? A fellow in overalls who drives a truck?

How about a person with deep and seasoned faith, a great deal of Bible know-how, a humanitarian who happens to be a former President of the United States, and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Jimmy Carter?

I know, by mentioning a political figure, it will be natural for a whole host of associations to come to mind. But hold off for a minute.

Jimmy Carter published a devotional, which I find interesting. Here’s Carter, coming to us as a simple person of faith, with a year of readings about how to discover a deep and abiding faith.

The devotional is based on Carter’s notes from his decades-long Bible study at a small church in Plains, Georgia, and while President. The book has four parts: launching, growing, serving and maturing.

What’s amazing is he published it when he was 87 years old. And with all he accomplished, here’s someone we could listen to when it comes to discovering maturity.

Carter wrote, “More than anything else, this troubled world needs the active influence of mature Christians.” In his book, he explores “how to give God our best, adopt priorities, maintain self-confidence without pride or arrogance, magnify our influence, and continue building a foundation of faith.”¹

Sounds good to me. You may want to check it out.

Why am I talking about maturity? Well, that’s the context for our verses for today, from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. When we’re at a crossroads, facing things which can separate and divide us, that’s when our spiritual maturity is needed.

Human maturity is the development of emotional, psychological, social and spiritual capabilities, allowing us to respond to life’s complexity with responsibility, self-control, empathy and wisdom.

¹ <https://guideposts.org/daily-devotions/devotions-for-inspiration/discovering-a-mature-faith/>

We gain maturity through a lifelong process of trial and error.

Through experience, reflection and prayer, we learn to align actions with values, understand ourselves, and navigate challenges with balance and perspective. There's a certain wisdom that comes with age.

Paul's letter is a bit raw as he begins, *“when I first came to you to let you in on God's sheer genius, I didn't try to impress you with polished speeches and the latest philosophy. I deliberately kept it plain and simple: first Jesus and who he is; then Jesus and what he did....*

I was unsure of how to go about this and felt totally inadequate... and so nothing I said could have impressed you or anyone else. But the Message came through anyway. God's Spirit and God's power did it, which made it clear that your life of faith is a response to God's power, not to some fancy mental or emotional footwork by me or anyone else.

We, of course, have plenty of wisdom to pass on to you once you get your feet on firm spiritual ground, but it's not popular wisdom, the fashionable wisdom... that will be out-of-date in a year or so.

God's wisdom is something mysterious that goes deep into the interior of God's purposes” (1 Corinthians 2:1-7, MSG).

Paul then quotes Isaiah, *“No one's ever seen or heard anything like this, never so much as imagined anything quite like it, what God has arranged for those who love God” (64:4, CEB).* God arranges and then reveals marvelous things to us as we become more mature.

And how does God reveal these marvelous things? Spiritually.

God's Spirit reveals to our spirit the depths of God, or if you prefer the being of God. This helps us to see creation and the people we meet with God's eyes and listen with God's ears. Our will, mind and heart, when attuned by love, are open and receptive to God's will, mind and heart.

And that's a good thing. Last week, we learned God isn't impressed by our knowledge, wisdom, position or what we have. What God looks for in us is faith. God wants to know why we are in a relationship with Jesus and how this shapes who we are and what we do.

I don't know about you, but I find this helpful, particularly when I'm with people. It reminds me we share our faith by the way we live, who we are. It also reminds me to be mindful of what I say and do.

For example, saying “the Bible says” to someone who doesn’t accept scripture as relevant or meaningful isn’t helpful. We need to translate our churchy lingo for those who are still struggling, still seeking, even when it comes with a bit of heat.

Years ago, I was with a group distributing Bibles on a college campus, and it was going pretty well. Different students would accept a Testament, or not. There’d be an occasional comment, but little was said usually. And it was always exciting when a lecturer stopped by.

But, on occasion, you’d offer a Bible to a student and they’d respond negatively. Often, it was loud and dramatic. You know, embarrassing.

Strangely enough, it rarely bothered me. And it’s not because I’m this cool, mellow dude. No, it’s because God showed me loud people are often the ones struggling with unresolved questions. Something about faith and their inner life isn’t aligned. And they feel it, deep down.

You see, the opposite of love isn’t hatred. It’s apathy. The people who don’t care one way or another are much harder to reach. They’re often insensitive to spiritual things. When we live with passion, our conscience controls our emotions. And guess who gave us those?

So, if someone pushes back when you share, don’t take offense or give up on them. Be calm, say a quick prayer for the Spirit to lead you, and listen with love. You may be planting or nurturing a seed of faith. And you might even feel a little joy when you do.

“Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.”

This quote is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, even though historians can’t find a single record of when he said this. It sounds like Francis, though. And he did say something similar: “It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.”²

When we trust God, our life is a witness to God’s love and grace.

Sure, we’re still learning and don’t get it right at times. But with the Lord walking alongside us, helping to carry our load, we can bear the trials and temptations of life. And, we learn how to help lift the load of those around us, passing our blessings on.

² www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/somos-del-senor/fifth-sunday-after-the-epiphany-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes

What do we offer? Jesus and his unconditional love. Not data about Christ, though there is a narrative to tell and knowledge to share. Not a process of joining the church, though there is a family who will gather us in and help us be a part of the whole. Not levels to attain and achievements to unlock, though there are processes and systems helping us keep focused. What we have is what Paul had, and that is himself and the Christ dwelling within.

Paul talks about sharing an inner experience, a wisdom taught by the Spirit. He also talks about how the “unspiritual” struggle with this wisdom and don’t understand these gifts. The unfamiliar can be scary.

So, are we just supposed to be with those people who already have faith, a relationship with Jesus? Of course not. Paul’s point is this: watch what we say and do. We usually can’t start with the language of faith, the words we speak, the hymns we sing, the style of our service, the things we hold on to as insiders.

But if insider things aren’t helpful, what are we left with? The same thing Paul was left with when he showed up in Corinth, Jesus. And a lot of awe and reverence. In the end, it’s about a relationship with Christ. But it might begin with a relationship with you. With us. With disciples of Jesus who rely only on Christ and are willing to demonstrate what God is doing in their lives each and every day.

**This is a call to be real as we make disciples who make disciples.
This is how love transforms the world.**

Let us pray ...

1 Corinthians 2:9-16 (CEB)

But this is precisely what is written: *God has prepared things for those who love him that no eye has seen, or ear has heard, or that haven't crossed the mind of any human being.* God has revealed these things to us through the Spirit. The Spirit searches everything, including the depths of God.

Who knows a person's depths except their own spirit that lives in them? In the same way, no one has known the depths of God except God's Spirit. We haven't received the world's spirit but God's Spirit so that we can know the things given to us by God. These are the things we are talking about - not with words taught by human wisdom but with words taught by the Spirit - we are interpreting spiritual things to spiritual people.

But people who are unspiritual don't accept the things from God's Spirit. They are foolishness to them and can't be understood, because they can only be comprehended in a spiritual way. Spiritual people comprehend everything, but they themselves aren't understood by anyone. *Who has known the mind of the Lord, who will advise him?* But we have the mind of Christ.