

Spirit, Faith and What It Means to Be a Member of Grace Church

Homily – May 23, 2010

Brandon Hamilton

(Opening prayer) – Dear Lord help us to become true children of God by listening for your Holy Spirit and let us act in ways that bring us closer to you. In Jesus' name we pray. – Amen

Good Morning. My name is Brandon Hamilton and I have been a member of the Grace Church family for over 7 years. When I was asked by the stewardship committee to speak to you about Spirit, faith and what it means to be a member of Grace Church I was more than happy to do it. My wife Sue and I were married here in 2004 and her Mom Gerri is also a member here. We also have a new son David Gabriel whom we adopted in December and we are excited for him to meet his new church family.(8 am only..I would also like to especially welcome my parents George and Carleen who are visiting from my childhood church St. Bartholomew in Cherry Hill.) Here at Grace I am a chalice bearer, youth leader, lay reader, vestry member and most recently your Jr. Warden. You also may have seen Sue and me literally running around town as I am the president of the local running club and we have run and trained together for many marathons. And now we are both happily taking on the most important role of all which is parenthood. We will surely have our hands full but we will always find the time for our extended church family as it is such an integral part of our lives.

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I could not have found a better Sunday to speak about the spirit then on Pentecost Sunday. Today is the day that the church celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit. In the first reading it descends on the people and they are overcome with the miraculous spirit that is poured out upon all flesh. Something amazing happens when the Spirit descends on the people. Not only do they start speaking in other languages but they also can hear each one speaking in their own native language. It is a reminder that when God speaks we all hear it in our own way. Of course initially there are doubts. This just doesn't happen. How is it possible? That day they blamed it on new wine and said that they must be drunk. But it is Peter that reminds them that this is a powerful sign. It is emphasized in the reading that it happened for everyone. Both slaves and free, both men and women and people from all the different nations. The Spirit did not discriminate. This reminds me very much of Grace Church because here at Grace we take pride in being a welcoming Church for everyone. In fact when the congregation is asked what is important to them being a welcoming church is often at the top of the list of why people come here. The Spirit seems to be alive here. What happened in that room so many years ago was miraculous but does the Spirit still speak to us today and even more importantly do we hear it?

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I am a huge fan of the singer Peter Gabriel. Today's first reading reminds me of something that happened to him and I'd like to share it with you. In the song Solsbury Hill he writes about his own experience with the Spirit and how it changed his life. The opening lyrics are "Climbing up on Solsbury Hill. I could see the city lights. Wind was blowing, time stood still. Eagle flew out of the night. He was something to observe. Came in close, I heard a voice. Standing stretching every nerve I had to listen had no choice I did not believe the information. Just had to trust imagination. My heart going boom boom, boom. "Son" he said. "You can grab your things I've come to take you home". Whenever I hear that line "My heart going boom boom boom." I often get chills. The reason is that whenever I feel touched by the Holy Spirit that is exactly how I feel. It is that standing and stretching every nerve, it is that feeling that something powerful is happening. Have you ever felt that in your life? Think for a moment about your own life and try and remember when you felt like your heart was going to leap out of your chest. Whenever I feel that I know that something miraculous is happening and the Holy Spirit is upon me.

I heard that Peter Gabriel song on the radio the other day and I thought of another analogy that describes our relationship with the Spirit. Think for a moment about radio signals. They are everywhere. Imagine

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trying to explain to someone in ancient times this concept of radio signals being all around you all the time. You can't see them or touch them but yet we know they are there. How do we know? Because we can turn on the radio, dial in to our favorite station and hear it. To me that is exactly how the Holy Spirit works. We are constantly surrounded by the Holy Spirit. Whether you can see it or touch it doesn't matter. It is there. But we can only hear the Holy Spirit if we are tuned in to hear it. Ahh....That becomes the challenge for all of us. How do we tune in to it? God has already proven to us today in the first reading that he broadcasts in many different languages and we can hear it in whatever language is our own. But how do we hear it?

In our secular lives God can be pretty hard to hear. In order to be in tune with God's spirit you must put yourself in the best location to pick up the best reception. For me the best location to pick up the signal is at Grace Church. By surrounding myself with people who are also searching for the Holy Spirit I build even better reception and I find that the more time spent at church and the more disciplined I am in my stewardship plan and the more I actively participate the more I discover that the Spirit is really right there in front of me.

From my own experience what I discovered is that when I increased my participation and worked on trying to tithe to support all the gifts at

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Grace Church amazing things started to happen in my life. In the secular world we are accustomed to give and receive relationships. When we give something we usually expect something in return. But with God that relationship is different. God's Grace tells us that God always loves us no matter what. We can't earn that love, pay for that love or do anything to deserve it. But when we actively participate and support the church then somehow the signals and signs are clearer and we become more in touch with the Holy Spirit. God doesn't suddenly love me any more if I choose to tithe. That love has always been there and will always be there forever. But it is when we do the things that get us in tune with God's love that we can recognize that love and have the faith to act in ways that only bring us closer to the heart of God.

Can you imagine how my heart felt when I first read today's 2<sup>nd</sup> reading? The reading is all about receiving the spirit of adoption. As Christians we are all children of God by adoption. For all who are lead by the Spirit of God are the children of God. That is a pretty powerful concept. I have my own personal adoption story I want to share with you that more than speaks about the spirit of adoption. Last December 17<sup>th</sup> on my birthday the story began. I was on vacation in Disney's Animal Kingdom Park with Sue and her Mom. We were watching the Jingle Jungle parade. Sue's phone

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rang and she let the voice mail get it. Then my phone rang and I also let the voice mail get it. It suddenly occurred to us that it was the adoption agency we had been working with to plan our adoption. I immediately stepped into the nearest store and called the agency back. And that is when we first learned about our beautiful baby boy. He was very tiny, only 1 pound 14 ounces. He was born 3 months premature. He was on a breathing tube and because of his extreme prematurity needed a lot of care and support to survive. He had a twin brother that passed away. We were asked if we wanted to submit our profile to the birth mother to see if she would choose us to be his parents. The interesting thing about our adoption agency is that the birth parents choose us. And it is up to us to decide if we wanted to be chosen. It reminds me that God also chooses us to be his children and it up to us accept and acknowledge it by following the Spirit. So we had to decide what to do. What an unbelievable moment. Believe me. My heart was going Boom Boom Boom. So we started to talk about things and make our decision together. And for both of us we both talked about signs. For me it was my birthday. I met Sue on my birthday so I knew that my birthday was already a special day for me. We also talked about our Faith. And we both realized that God would never present a situation that we could not handle no matter what the outcome was. We would always have God's love to

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support us and get us through. And it was that “Leap of Faith” that allowed us to put our fear aside and present ourselves to the birth mom to be David’s parents. We were chosen to be David’s parents and on Dec 23<sup>rd</sup> he was placed with us. We became his parents and we excitedly called those who had been so supportive of us along the way. When we called Deacon Colleen to tell her the good news she told us that she had lit a prayer candle for us and had a dream that we had adopted. This dream was on the same day that the birth mother called our agency. We went to visit him for the first time on Christmas Eve at St. Christopher’s hospital for Children in the NICU. The entire Hospital lobby was decorated just like Animal Kingdom with the same animal themed Christmas tree that Disney had. When we first saw him the first thing we saw was a Mickey Mouse in his isolate. And then when we met the nurse she was decorated in Mickey Mouse scrubs. It was yet another sign that something really special was happening. It was as if God was welcoming us with things that were special to us and calming us with familiar things. Well our little David was a fighter and defied a lot of odds. We visited him twice a day, every day for almost 4 months while he continued to amaze us with his incredible fighting spirit. We read to him, held him, fed him and let him know how much we loved him. And so many people prayed for him. Perhaps you heard his name during the prayers for

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the people. Now you truly know what the power of your prayers can do. We continued to see signs everywhere. One day on the way to the hospital on one of the harder days we saw a bird fly over head and the sun hit the bottom of it and it literally glowed in the sky. These signs seemed to correspond to the days when he would overcome yet another obstacle and they always gave us great hope. On the day they removed his breathing tube somehow there was a break in one of our winter blizzards that allowed us to be there with him and to get back home before the worst of the storm hit. Well now he is finally home with us and over 10 and half pounds now. And he is continuing to amaze us every day doing all the typical things that new babies do. But having our faith in God we know all these typical things are really just more little miracles and we are so thankful for every day that he is with us. He is a testament to the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. And because we were in tune with that Spirit we were able to hear that Spirit and act on it in a way that changed us forever.

The Gospel today talks even more about the Holy Spirit. Philip says to Jesus, show us the Father. But Jesus looks at him and tells him that he has already seen him because he has seen Jesus. Jesus talks about the Holy Spirit being the Advocate that will be with us forever. He talks about how it is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees

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him nor knows him. This seems all too familiar to us. We don't always easily accept the Holy Spirit because we are not in tune with it. But Jesus says something very profound that I think we can all relate to here at Grace Church. "Believe me that I am the father and the father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact will do greater works than these because I am going to the father." It's almost as if Jesus is acknowledging that many of us just won't see the spirit right away and that's ok. He's telling us to look deeper. Look at the works that have been done. Look at this Church. Look at the incredible outreach that is being done to help others. Look at the valuable Christian education that the children are getting. Look at the clergy and the way they inspire us. Look at the beauty of the architecture of our building which reminds us of our deep roots and history. Listen to the music which moves our hearts. But most importantly look at the people that reach across the isle to shake your hand at the peace. They are really what make us the strong Christian family that is Grace Church. There is something special that happens in this Church community that does not happen in the secular world. We are welcoming, we are accepting and we just say to you come as you are. There is always something here that will make your heart go "Boom Boom Boom".

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You may just learn that the more you participate in the life of the church and the more you reach out to help support all that is here and important to you that you might just start to see wonderful things happen in your life. You may just start to hear that Holy Spirit that has been there all the time. I will leave you today with the closing words of the Gospel that sums up the way that Jesus Christ continues to love us even after he died. “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Amen.