

The Witness of the Spirit
A Sermon for July 23, 2017
Romans 8:14-17
Lansdowne UMC

What evidence is there that God exists? Although some people take the existence of God for granted, for other people it's not quite so simple.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of evidence. The first is objective evidence. An example of objective evidence would be something like the historical evidence for God raising Jesus from the dead. Scholars can use all the tools of historical study to come to well established historical facts about Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection appearances. Combined with Jesus' teachings about himself, and the reality that common-folk disciples were willing to be tortured and die for their belief that Jesus was raised from the dead, it's quite reasonable to come to the conclusion that the best explanation is that God raised Jesus from the dead.

There are quite a few other objective reasons to believe that God exists. One that should provide every atheist with a real gut-check moment is the so-called "moral argument." It goes like this: If God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist. But objective moral values do exist. Therefore God does exist. I don't want to get too bogged down in this, but here's what this is trying to get at: If God does not exist, then there is no frame of reference to figure out which way is up, morally speaking. One person's viewpoint cannot really be said to be better than anyone else's viewpoint if there isn't a God. Mother Teresa and Hitler are just two people living out their own desires-- neither of which is objectively good or objectively bad.

But everything in our human experience says that, in fact, experimenting on babies, abusing children, and murdering innocent people is bad. We observe it to be true as much as we can observe anything to be true. Atheism cannot provide a foundation for the reality of objective moral values that all of us experience every day. It provides a reality that not only fails to make sense of our experience, but is in fact completely unlivable. There is injustice in the world. Some things in fact are not fair. Objective moral values do exist, therefore God exists.

There are several other arguments for the existence of God that remain unrefuted by even the world's foremost philosophers. Ask me about them if you care. This type of objective evidence can be very useful for the person that thinks that it's irrational to believe in God because it provides the common starting point of reason and logic.

Most Christians don't think about it like that, though. And that's fine. Objective evidence only gets you so far. And so we tend to think about the other type of evidence: subjective evidence. In other words, we talk about our personal experience of God. It's this experience, this subjective evidence that I really want to focus on today-- a particular evidence that is usually called "the witness of the spirit," "the testimony of the Spirit," or otherwise just "assurance."

Listen again to the words of Paul, who had been one of the church's greatest persecutors, but whose experience of God was so profound that he became the church's greatest evangelist:

14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” 16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

Paul is drawing on a particular experience that he shares with all of the Christians that he is writing to. Having been indwelt by the Spirit of God, early Christians found themselves able to worship and pray in the same manner that Jesus did-- experiencing an intimate relationship with God as Father-- Abba in Aramaic, which is the language that Jesus primarily spoke.

Paul says that intimate relationship with God is an evidence. And he says, “it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

How do you know that God exists? That’s one question. But even more than that, how do you know that you’ve loved and accepted by God as a child? How do you *know* the truth of Paul’s statement at the beginning of chapter 8, that there is no condemnation for you?

I think most United Methodists would say that it’s something that you just take by faith. That’s not actually the official teaching of the church-- but more on that in a minute. In fact Paul doesn’t even seem to be saying that it’s something that’s taken on faith. Paul *assumes* that all the Christians he is writing to have the testimony of two witnesses that they are loved and accepted by God.

The first is the testimony of their own spirit. Maybe the easiest way to think about this is your conscience. It's the part of us that either feels God's love and acceptance, or feels itself condemned by sin. It's the part of us that believes ourselves to exhibit or lack the fruit of the Spirit-- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Like the concept of conscience, it's hard to put your finger on. It's more than just emotion and sentiment. It's something that's very deep and internal to ourselves.

But Paul also describes a second witness-- you need at least two witnesses in a Jewish court of law to establish facts. He says "it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit"-- it is the Spirit of adoption, the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit witnesses, or testifies. Now what in the world could that mean?

It's probably easiest to describe it by way of a story from Methodist history, which you know by now is going to bring me to talk about John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement. We've talked about him a few times since I've been here. Back in December, I shared with you the story about what happened to him when he was on a ship making his way to America to be a missionary in the colony of Georgia. His ship was tossed around by strong storms and he was scared for his life. He didn't feel that he was ready to meet his maker. But during those storms, some Moravian Christians wowed him with their peace and deep assurance. Even though he was an Anglican clergyman, it was something that John had never witnessed before. But when John saw it, he wanted it.

And so when he gets to Georgia, he decides to start meeting with some of the Moravian pastors to get direction. In particular, he meets with a man named August Spangenberg. He wrote about it in his journal. Spangenberg says to him, "My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit, that you are a child of God?" Wesley writes, "I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it, and asked, "Do you *know* Jesus Christ?" I paused, and said, "I know he is the Saviour of the world." "True," replied he; "but do you know he has saved you?" I answered, "I hope he has died to save me." He only added, "Do you know yourself?" I said, "I do." But I fear they were vain words.

That first question that Spangenberg asks Wesley emerges naturally out of Romans 8:16, When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. Wesley's reading of scripture leads him to believe that this is something that he *should* be experiencing if the bible is true. Many people today would just say, "well I guess the bible is just a bunch of empty religious words." But not Wesley. He has the humility to believe that it's more likely that the problem is with him and not with the Bible.

And so he goes on a quest for "blessed assurance"-- the assurance of his salvation and his status as a child of God. He ends up finding it at last on that famous day on Aldersgate street in England, when he describes how his heart was strangely warmed. He says "an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." He had read and preached Romans-- there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus for the law of the Spirit

of life... has set you free from the law of sin and death-- but now he actually experienced it as true for him.

For Wesley, this *was* salvation. And while Wesley would go on to teach that the degree of assurance that one experiences can vary with circumstances and seasons of life, he believed it to be essential to true Christianity, or as he liked to call it, “plain, scriptural Christianity.” So maybe it doesn’t surprise you to know that this experience of assurance-- “the witness of the Spirit” or “testimony of the Spirit”-- is to this day part of the official teaching of the United Methodist Church.

So why would you want to experience this? Having the witness of the Spirit of God has been described as getting hugged by your Heavenly Father. Or as Wesley puts it, it’s “the heart resting as in the arms of Jesus.” It’s not simply an emotional response to God, but a noticeable external force. It’s not something that we manufacture ourselves. John Wesley says, “By the testimony of the Spirit, I mean, an inward impression on the soul whereby the Spirit of God immediately and directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus has loved me, and given himself for me; that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.”

Here’s another way to put it: do you want a faith that can get you through the fiercest storms of life with the calm that those Moravians experienced on the boat to Georgia?

Paul seems to have an image in mind of the trials of the exodus as he writes Romans.

You remember the story of the exodus from Egypt? God works wonderful miracles to bring the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt, culminating in the passover. In the same way, Jesus becomes the passover lamb and the atoning sacrifice that brings humanity out of its slavery to sin. The Israelites cross through the waters of the red sea, just as Christians come through the waters of baptism. Then God gives the Israelites the law, just as at Pentecost the Christians receive the law of the Spirit. We made it that far last week. The Israelites then proceed to be led by the Spirit of God through the wilderness toward the promised land. They had set up a tabernacle-- a tent-- to worship God. And the presence of God would come upon the tent as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. We read in Numbers chapter 9 that “Whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, then the Israelites would set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the Israelites would camp.” The Israelites would literally be led by the manifest presence of God.

God provided everything that the Israelites needed in the wilderness-- bread from heaven (manna) would appear every day for them to eat. And there were quails as well for food. But some of the people grumbled against God and Moses and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.” They didn’t want to press toward the promised land. They were frustrated and afraid, so they wanted to go back to Egypt.

And so Paul says, “You know, it’s not just the Israelites that are children of God. It’s everyone who is led by the Spirit of God-- it’s anyone who goes after the manifest presence of God.” And then he says these

powerful words: “You didn’t receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear.” In other words, don’t be like those Israelites that wanted to go back to slavery in Egypt. The promised land is ahead.

Egypt is the well-known past. You can imagine the Israelites saying, “sure, it was slavery, but, well, better the devil you know than the devil you don’t.” Maybe, but we’re not talking about following the devil, we’re talking about following the movement of the Spirit.

And the Spirit you’ve received isn’t a Spirit of slavery-- it’s a Spirit of adoption. It’s the Holy Spirit that testifies to you that you are a child of God. And according to Paul, the Apostle John, and the writer of Hebrews, and others in the new testament, you can *know* that you’re a child of God. And knowing that you’re a child of God means you know that God is with you. You don’t have to return to slavery to sin. The way forward looks hard, but you’ve already got all the ingredients you need. You’re a child of the King with a great inheritance coming to you. The past is gone, and God’s future is before you. You might be led to beautiful places or you might be led to awful places to make them beautiful, but if God is with you, then that’s all you need in the world.

So don’t be afraid of what the future holds, even if there might be pain ahead. You’re a child of God. You relate to God in the same way that Jesus related to God-- by the Holy Spirit. You can address God in the same intimate way that Jesus did, “Abba, Father.” And if you really, truly have the witness of the Spirit, then external circumstances lose their power over you.

Paul says in Philippians chapter 4, “I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

The church of Jesus Christ needs more people for whom these aren't just empty words-- people who have the witness of the Spirit. People who are honest and recognize that when the witness leaves them, that means it's time to seek the presence of God again. Because if the cloud has moved from the tent, you have to seek it.

Will you go after the presence of God today, and tomorrow too? And the day after that? Will you seek to be led by the Spirit, not just in a nominal way, but in a real-lifegiving way? God wants you to know in the depths of your heart how much you are loved. So may you seek and find the assurance. May you follow the Spirit through whatever wilderness comes. And may you share your experience with others, so that they to may know the unspeakable joy of the abiding presence of God.