

A Sermon for Robbinsdale United Church of Christ  
January 10, 2010  
Baptism of Christ Sunday  
Rev. T. Michael Rock

Scripture Readings:  
Acts 8:14-17 and Luke 3:15-17,21-22

Sermon Title: Searching for the Holy Spirit

(open with prayer)

I've probably told the story before, but it bears repeating again. I repeat it over and over again in my own life and prayers as a way to center and remember what is most important. It was the first year after my ordination and a quiet woman who spoke only broken English began to sit in the front pew and receive sermons in a way I had never experienced before. I remember talking and teaching and trying to get some point across, but when my eyes met hers, it seemed like my words had more meaning and that something beyond my understanding was in the midst of that exchange. After a few of those Sundays, Irina Losovskya started coming through the line at the end of the service and instead of shaking my hand, she would reach out and touch my heart. I could feel her presence and her love, and it was a wonderful love and wonderful soul. We barely said any words, but there was a love that was there in all those good boundary-filled ways. After a few months, Irina asked if she could be baptized, and so we began the conversation about her past and her search for the Holy Spirit. Irina was 69 years old at the time, and had just come to the United States the previous year to reunite with her son who came to the US nine years earlier. Irina had spent the first 65 years of her life living at a compound for political prisoners in Siberia, Russia. Her father was a leader in a democracy movement in Russia when Irina was a young girl. The family was deemed too dangerous and moved with other families to a Gulag by the early KGB, and even though the wall fell and the Communist leaders of Russia stepped aside in 1989, the release of these "dangerous" descendants of democracy lovers would take a few more years. There was no religion at all in the Gulag, and Irina had never even heard the name, "Jesus" until she was 67 years old. She had three children in her 20's, but they had all been taken away to be raised in Russian cities by other families. When she arrived in Leningrad, she found a trail to a family that might have raised her oldest son. It didn't take long to find out where he was and to begin a relationship via letter and phone to ignite a possible reunion. The family that raised her son invited her to stay until she could go to the United States. They gave her shelter and a small Russian

Bible, and she began to read. With no knowledge of the church, Irina came to the Bible as a pure soul and found a sense of purpose and meaning for her life. By the time she came to sit in the pews at the church I was serving, Irina had read the book several times and had decided that she wanted to be baptized, but she wanted to be baptized the way Jesus was baptized. She wanted the water and she wanted to rise out of the water to God's voice saying, "you are my beloved." So, I talked it over with the Deacons and we decided to have a Sunday service and then get in our cars and drive to the nearest public access beach to our church in Sudbury, MA. That beach was on Walden Pond, and in an act of civil disobedience that would have made Thoreau proud, a hundred people drove around the gate and paraded down to the water. Irina had made herself a beautiful muslin dress for the occasion that was layered in all the appropriate places and I had borrowed an "immersion" robe from a Baptist pastor friend and as the congregation sang on the lakeshore, Irina and I waded in past the shadow of the tree lined shore into the bright September sun. It was there that I asked Irina about her desire to be baptized and this rookie baptizer immersed Irina in the water three times and as sure as I am standing here today, Irina and I heard the voice from heaven proclaim, "you are my beloved." It was one of the purest moments of my life and ministry and it continues to remind me how little I have to do with the movement of the Holy Spirit. It is both an awesome story and a humbling one.

I'm sure the same was true for those early disciples who went to teach the new believers about the Holy Spirit. It wasn't like they carried it in their bags or said some magic words and the Holy Spirit appeared. In fact it has been the mistake of many religious leaders that they somehow had that special ability and others did not. The disciples were humble enough to know that their role of Holy Spirit introduction was to simply pass along their own teaching and wisdom that often the story comes first and we are introduced to belief and ritual and the name of God and Gospel of Jesus, but to change your life and follow your baptism it is about recognition and seeing. When you can recognize the Holy Spirit in others then your baptism comes alive. When you can hear the voice of God claiming and naming everyone and everything around you then you are no longer separate for your God you created you, formed you and called you by name.

There is a simple word we use that describes this spiritual truth, and that word is "grace". Grace and truth go hand in hand as things that describe how you recognize the Holy Spirit. Grace gives us chance to be released from fear and sin and guilt and anything else that we know in name only and lets us see ourselves and others the way God intended us to be, "the beloved children of God." In the great cosmic battle between fear and peace, or sin and grace, Jesus reminds us that grace and peace

win every time. Now, the church has an awful track record as the hawkers and promoters of sin, because sin has won a lot of lesser confrontations, but when it comes to its confrontation with grace, sin cowers away in the corner and has no ground on which to stand. Grace wins because God loves us and calls us by name. It is the reminder of every good prophetic work and every humble leader. The Holy Spirit is born in you already. I see it you. Together we recognized that Spirit within Madeline today, and we hope that her parents and those who love her will continue to remind her that she is loved and filled with grace all the days of her life.

In Marilyn Robinson's book *Gilead* the lead character is a minister who is often reflecting back on his childhood as a PK. In one story he remembers the desire to baptize and along with another PK friend gather their new litter of kittens beside the old washtub for baptism. They were about half done when mama cat puts an end to the ritual. I'm kind of glad Nathan and Emmitt aren't here to hear that story. It is in the reflection near the end of the book after a life of ministry that the pastor remembers the kittens and the desire to claim those creatures as God's own beloved. The pastors' role in the baptism is simple that, remind the one that water is a symbol of God's presence as are fire and wind. God is in you, around you, and through you in the way to share your love with others. You are beloved child of God. Your response as the one who receives the water is to simply say "YES!"

(Ritual of Baptism)