

Paul Tillich's Complete "Spiritual Presence" Sermon on Pentecost

First published in "*The Eternal Now*"

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is from God, who has qualified us to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life.

2 Corinthians 3:5-6

I

"Not that we are sufficient" -- writes Paul. Who are "we"? Obviously, "we" are the apostle himself and those who work with him. These include all those who are qualified to serve the "new covenant," as he calls it -- namely, the new relationship between God and man, and through it the "new creation," the new state of things in man and his world, of which Paul is a messenger. And everyone who participates in it, however fragmentarily, is qualified to serve. But when we ask, who does participate in the new creation, we soon find this to be an unanswerable question. For nobody can look into the innermost center of another being, nor even fully into his own heart. Therefore, nobody can say with certainty that anyone else shares in the new state of things, and he can scarcely say it of himself. But even less can he say of another, however distorted the man's life may be, that he does not participate at all in the new reality, and that he is not qualified to serve its cause. Certainly, nobody can say this of himself.

Perhaps it is more important in our time to emphasize this last -- namely, the qualification of ourselves and those around us to serve the new creation, our ability to be priests in mutual help towards achieving it. Not long ago, many people, especially members of the church, felt qualified to judge others and to tell them what to believe and how to act. Today we feel deeply the arrogance of this attitude. Instead, there is a general awareness of our lack of qualification, especially among the middle-aged and younger generations. We are inclined to disqualify ourselves, and to withdraw from the service of the new creation. We feel that we don't participate in it, and that we cannot bring others into such participation. We decline the honor and the burden of mutual priesthood. Often this is caused by unconcern for our highest human vocation. But it is equally caused by despair about ourselves, by doubt, guilt and emptiness. We feel infinitely removed from a new state of things, and totally unable to help others towards it.

But then the other words of our text must become effective, that our qualification is from God and not from ourselves, and the all-consoling word that God is greater than our heart. If we look beyond ourselves at that which is greater than we, then we can feel called to help others in just the moment when we ourselves need help most urgently -- and, astonishingly, we can help. A power works through us which is not of us. We may remember situations when words rose out of the depth of our being, perhaps in the midst of our own great anxiety, that struck another in the depth of his being and his great anxiety so strongly that they helped him to a new state of things. Perhaps we remember other situations

when an action of a person, whose life we knew was disrupted, had a priestly, awakening, and healing effect upon us. It did not come from him, but was in him, as it did not come from us, but was in us. Let us not assume the task of being mediators of the new creation to others arrogantly, be it in personal or ecclesiastical terms. Yet, let us not reject the task of being priest for each other because of despair about ourselves or unconcern about what should be our highest concern. Against both arrogance and despair stands the word that our qualification does not come from us, nor from any man or any institution, not even from the church, but from God. And if it comes from God it is His Spiritual Presence in our spirit.

II

When we now hear the word "Spirit," we are somehow prepared for it: the power in us, but not of us, qualifying us for the service of a new state of things is what Spirit means. This may sound strange to many both inside and outside the churches for whom the term Holy Spirit is the strangest of the strange terms that appear among Christian symbols. Rarely a subject of preaching, it is also neglected in religious teaching. Its festival, Pentecost, has almost disappeared in the popular consciousness of this country. Some groups that claim spiritual experiences of a particular character are considered unhealthy, and often rightly so. Liturgically, the use of the term "Holy Ghost" produces an impression of great remoteness from our way of speaking and thinking. But spiritual experience is a reality for everyone, as actual as the experience of being loved or the breathing of air. Therefore, we should not shy away from the word "Spirit." We should become fully aware of the Spiritual Presence, around us and in us, even though we realize how limited our experience of "God present to our spirit" may be. For this is what Divine Spirit means: God present to our spirit. Spirit is not a mysterious substance; it is not a part of God. It is God Himself; but not God as the creative Ground of all things and not God directing history and manifesting Himself in its central event, but God as present in communities and personalities, grasping them, inspiring them, and transforming them.

For Spirit is first of all power, the power that drives the human spirit above itself towards what it cannot attain by itself, the love that is greater than all other gifts, the truth in which the depth of being opens itself to us, the holy that is the manifestation of the presence of the ultimate.

You may say again -- "I do not know this power. I have never had such an experience. I am not religious or, at least, not Christian and certainly not a bearer of the Spirit. What I hear from you sounds like ecstasy; and I want to stay sober. It sounds like mystery, and I try to illuminate what is dark. It sounds like self-sacrifice and I want to fulfill my human possibilities." To this I answer -- Certainly, the Spiritual power can thrust some people into an ecstasy that most of us have never experienced. It can drive some towards a kind of self-sacrifice of which most of us are not capable. It can inspire some to insights into the depth of being that remain unapproachable to most of us. But this does not justify our denial that the Spirit is also working in us. Without doubt, wherever it works, there is an element, possibly very small, of self-surrender, and an element, however weak, of ecstasy, and an element, perhaps fleeting, of awareness of the mystery of existence. Yet these small effects of the Spiritual power are enough to prove its presence.

But there are other conscious and noticeable manifestations of the Spiritual Presence. Let me enumerate some of them, while you ask yourselves whether and to what degree they are of your own experience. The Spirit can work in you with a soft but insistent voice, telling you that your life is empty and meaningless, but that there are chances of a new life waiting before the door of your inner self to fill its void and to conquer its dullness. The Spirit can work in you, awakening the desire to strive towards the sublime against the profanity of the average day. The Spirit can give you the courage that says "yes" to life in spite of the destructiveness you have experienced around you and within you. The Spirit can reveal to you that you have hurt somebody deeply, but it also can give you the right word that reunites him with you. The Spirit can make you love, with the divine love, someone you profoundly dislike or in whom you have no interest. The Spirit can conquer your sloth towards what you know is the aim of your life, and it can transform your moods of aggression and depression into stability and serenity.

The Spirit can liberate you from hidden enmity against those whom you love and from open vengefulness against those by whom you feel violated. The Spirit can give you the strength to throw off false anxieties and to take upon yourself the anxiety which belongs to life itself. The Spirit can awaken you to sudden insight into the way you must take your world, and it can open your eyes to a view of it that makes everything new. The Spirit can give you joy in the midst of ordinary routine as well as in the depth of sorrow.

The Spirit can create warmth in the coldness you feel within you and around you, and it can give you wisdom and strength where your human love towards a loved one has failed. The Spirit can throw you into a hell of despair about yourself and then give you the certainty that life has accepted you just when you felt totally rejected, and when you rejected yourself totally. The Spirit can give you the power of prayer, that nobody has except through the Spiritual Presence. For every prayer -- with or without words -- that reaches its aim, namely the reunion with the divine Ground of our being, is a work of the Spirit speaking in us and through us. Prayer is the Spiritual longing of a finite being to return to its origin.

These are works of the Spirit, signs of the Spiritual Presence with us and in us. In view of these manifestations, who can assert that he is without Spirit? Who can say that he is in no way a bearer of the Spirit?

He may be in a small way. But is there anybody among us who could say more than that about himself?

One can compare the Spiritual Presence with the air we breathe, surrounding us, nearest to us, and working life within us. This comparison has a deep justification: in most languages, the word "spirit" means breath or wind. Sometimes the wind becomes storm, grand and devastating. Mostly it is moving air, always present, not always noticed. In the same way the Spirit is always present, a moving power, sometimes in stormy ecstasies of individuals and groups, but mostly quiet, entering our human spirit and keeping it alive; sometimes manifest in great moments of history or a personal life, but mostly working hiddenly through the media of our daily encounters with men and world; sometimes using its creation, the religious communities and their Spiritual means, and often making itself felt in spheres far removed from what is usually called religious. Like the wind the Spirit blows where it wills! It is not subject to rule or limited by method. Its ways with men are not dependent on what men are and do. You

cannot force the Spirit upon yourself, upon an individual, upon a group, or even upon a Christian church. Although he who is the foundation of the church was himself of the Spirit, and although the Spirit as it was present in him is the greatest manifestation of Spiritual Presence, the Spirit is not bound to the Christian church or any one of them. The Spirit is free to work in the spirits of men in every human situation, and it urges men to let Him do so; God as Spirit is always present to the spirit of man.

But why does the psalmist pray -- "Take not thy Spirit from me!"? And why do we speak today of the "absent God," a term which plays a role in literature and art, and most of all in the personal experience of innumerable people? How can we unite the message of the Spiritual Presence with the experience of the absent God? Let me say something about the "absent God," by asking -- what is the cause of His absence? We may answer -- our resistance, our indifference, our lack of seriousness, our honest or dishonest questioning, our genuine or cynical doubt. All these answers have some truth, but they are not final. The final answer to the question as to who makes God absent is God Himself!

It is the work of the Spirit that removes God from our sight, not only for some men, but sometimes for many in a particular period. We live in an era in which the God we know is the absent God. But in knowing God as the absent God, we know of Him; we feel His absence as the empty space that is left by something or someone that once belonged to us and has now vanished from our view. God is always infinitely near and infinitely far. We are fully aware of Him only if we experience both of these aspects. But sometimes, when our awareness of Him has become shallow, habitual -- not warm and not cold -- when He has become too familiar to be exciting, too near to be felt in His infinite distance, then He becomes the absent God. The Spirit has not ceased to be present. The Spiritual Presence can never end. But the Spirit of God hides God from our sight. No resistance against the Spirit, no indifference, no doubt can drive the Spirit away. But the Spirit that always remains present to us can hide itself, and this means that it can hide God. Then the Spirit shows us nothing except the absent God, and the empty space within us which is His space. The Spirit has shown to our time and to innumerable people in our time the absent God and the empty space that cries in us to be filled by Him. And then the absent one may return and take the space that belongs to Him, and the Spiritual Presence may break again into our consciousness, awakening us to recognize what we are, shaking and transforming us. This may happen like the coming of a storm, the storm of the Spirit, stirring up the stagnant air of our Spiritual life, The storm will then recede; a new stagnancy may take place; and the awareness of the present God may be replaced by the awareness of the empty space within us. Life in the Spirit is ebb and flow -- and this means -- whether we experience the present or the absent God, it is the work of the Spirit

III

And now let me describe a symptom of the Spiritual Presence within us, the greatest of all, most powerfully expressed in Paul's words -- "Not in a written code, but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life." The work of the Spiritual Presence in a man reaches its height when it liberates him from the yoke of the commandments to the freedom of the Spirit. This is like a release from the sentence of death to a new life. A tremendous experience lies behind such words, an

experience in which we all can share, but one that is rare in its full depth, and is then a revolutionary power that, through men like Paul and Augustine and Luther, changes the Spiritual world, and, through it, the history of mankind. Can we, you and I, share in such an experience?

First, have we not all felt the deadening power of the written code, written not only in the ten commandments and their many interpretations in the Bible and history, but also with the authoritative pen of parents and society into the unconscious depths of our being, recognized by our conscience, judging us by what we do and, above all, by what we are? Nobody can flee from the voice of this written code, written internally as well as externally. And if we try to silence it, to close our ears against it, the Spirit itself frustrates these attempts, opening our ears to the cries of our true being of that which we are and ought to be in the sight of eternity. We cannot escape this judgment against us. The Spirit itself, using the written code, makes this impossible. For the Spirit does not give life without having led us through the experience of death. And certainly, the written code in its threatening majesty has the power to kill. It kills the joy of fulfilling our being by imposing upon us something we feel as hostile. It kills the freedom of answering creatively what we encounter in things and men by making us look at a table of laws. It kills our ability to listen to the calling of the moment, to the voiceless voice of others, and to the here and now. It kills our courage to act through the scruples of our anxiety-driven conscience. And among those who take it most seriously, it kills faith and hope, and throws them into self-condemnation and despair.

There is no way out from the written code. The Spirit itself prevents us from becoming compromisers, half fulfilling, half defying the commandments. The Spirit itself calls us back when we try to escape into indifference, or lawlessness, or (most usually) average self-righteousness. But when the Spirit calls us back, it does so not in order to hold us within the written code, but in order to give us life.

How can we describe the life that the Spirit gives us? I could use many words, well known to everybody, spoken by Paul himself, and after him by the great preachers and teachers of the church. I could say that the work of the Spirit, liberating us from the law, is freedom. Or I could say that its work is faith, or that its work is hope, and above all, that the Spirit creates love, the love in which all laws are confirmed and fulfilled and at the same time overcome. But if I used such words, the shadow of the absent God would appear and make you and me aware that we cannot speak like this today. If we did, freedom would be distorted into willfulness, faith into belief in the absurd, hope into unreal expectations, and love -- the word I would like most to use for the creation of the Spirit -- into sentimental feeling. The Spirit must give us new words, or revitalize old words to express true life. We must wait for them; we must pray for them; we cannot force them. But we know, in some moments of our lives, what life is. We know that it is great and holy, deep and abundant, ecstatic and sober, limited and distorted by time, fulfilled by eternity. And if the right words fail us in the absence of God, we may look without words at the image of him in whom the Spirit and the Life are manifest without limits.