

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
The Five Part Story: The Spirit Helps Us Live God's Love  
The Rev. Dr. John Judson  
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Genesis 41:37-40

John 14: 15-17, 25-26

“Why do you ordain women? Don't you know the Bible doesn't allow it.” That statement was not something I expected to hear as Cindy and I were waiting in line at Greenfield Village for a 4<sup>th</sup> of July event, several years ago. We went with friends and being there early were waiting in line with a thousand other sweating attendees. Someone how I struck up a conversation with a man behind me. We exchanged pleasantries. I learned he had worked for the State Department in Cambodia and he learned that I was a Presbyterian Minister. When he discovered my true identity, he wanted to know which Presbyterian denomination I worked for. When I told him, he said that he belonged to another Presbyterian denomination, one that only ordains men and then proceeded to ask why we ordained women. Over the years I had developed my elevator speech to answer that question, though I have not used it since I left Texas, where I used it a lot. My answer was the Paul said that there are neither male nor female in Christ; that Paul had affirmed the ministry of the pastor couple Pricilla and Aquilla; and that there had been a female Apostle, named Junia. None of that seemed to matter as he trotted the usual Bible verse that seem to oppose women's ordination. Realizing that this conversation was not going anywhere productive. I finally said something to the effect of, “Sure there are those passages, but sometimes the Spirit teaches us something new.” As He considered how to respond to that thought, the gates opened, Cindy grabbed me and we left before his head could explode.

The Spirit teaches us something new. For many Christians this is a frightening idea. It is frightening because many of us see our faith as having a nice, neat set of rules that have been handed down from the saints of old, and that those rules are etched into stone and so therefore the Spirit has nothing new to teach us. It is as if there came a time when an iron curtain descended upon the Christian world, such that those ideas and understandings of the past could never be changed. So to say that the Spirit might teach us something new is, for some, heretical. Yet that is not at all what Jesus says in the upper room. As he and the disciples are leaving Jesus says, “The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will (and this is my translation) continually teach you everything and continually remind you of all that I have said to you.” What does this mean? Let's pull it apart back to front. The Spirit will remind them of all that Jesus has said. What has he said, “A new commandment I give you, love one another as I have loved you.” Jesus sums up all of his teachings in this one new commandment. They are to live as servants of one another, loving each other as Jesus loved them. The Spirit will continually teach them everything. What is it that they need to be taught? How to love one another in new and different situations. Jesus, I believe, understood that the church would find itself facing new and unexpected situations with each passing year. No manual of operations or rules cut in stone could cover them all. What was needed was the Spirit to be present to continually teach them how to apply the love of God in each new moment. This is why we say that the Spirit helps us live God's love.

So what is it that we have learned that those before us did not know? What is it that the Spirit has taught us? For the church, we learned that slavery, though affirmed in the Bible, is wrong. We learned that women do not need to be subservient to men, though there seems to be that tendency in scripture. But we also learned some things here at First Pres. I say this because over the last 185 years of our history, the leadership has been almost all white men, because women were not allowed. But then about fifty years ago something began to happen. The Spirit began to teach us that God gifts men and women not only for faith but leadership. Eventually that led to women in leadership, not only as elders but as ministers, such as Louise Westfall, Amy Morgan, Joanne Blair, Kate Thoresen, Julie Madden and Bethany Peerbolte. The work of the Spirit did not end there though. It changed our understanding of inclusion and the best way to see that is to remind ourselves of our inclusion statement. "As Everybody's Church we strive to be a faithful, open and inclusive community. We welcome the full participation of all people of any ability, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or any other life circumstance." In other words, the Spirit has helped our church become a place where God's love and welcome in Christ is poured out to all. It has helped us live God's love in new and amazing ways with each passing generation.