

**Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea,
Gibson Island, Maryland, 1st Sunday after the Epiphany, January 7, 2018.**

Welcome to the Season of Epiphany. January 6 is the date on the Church calendar. The question for you and me during this Season is when is our date.

We have been given a wonderful gift - the Christ Child – with the expectation that we share this gift. Now it is time to get to work. Or maybe “work” is the wrong word. Yes, there’s work involved. Loving God and loving neighbor can be hard work. But there’s supposed to be joy in this effort. Our joy at receiving a Savior – the Christ Child – is meant to be contagious. It’s meant to be spread. And it’s meant to be caught.

We get this, at least in theory. We even know people who work hard at sharing the Good News of Christ and find joy in doing so. We admire their attitude, and we respect their results.

But knowing someone is not the same as being someone. Our assignment is not just to observe. Our assignment is to be the joyful workers, the ones who spread the Gospel, those who help others recognize the Spirit.

But we have some self-doubt, don’t we? There are times when we don’t feel Spirit-filled. And if we don’t feel it, it’s pretty hard to share it. Not to worry, however. We have today’s lessons, all about the Power of the Spirit to help us help others.

In the lesson from Acts (**Acts 19:1-7**), Paul serves as a vehicle of the Spirit. As he baptized people, the Holy Spirit came upon them and motivated these people to reach out to others. These folks would work joyfully, even unto death, and properly be named saints. Paul himself would earn the title.

The deeds of these saints represent a remarkable story. Ironically, so remarkable that our self-doubt about being a vehicle of the Holy Spirit is not lessened, but heightened. We’re not sure that **verse 11 of Psalm 29** applies to us: “The Lord shall give strength to his people; the Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace.”

Well, how do we gain this strength, this blessing? Is it something that we’re not believing and therefore not doing? Or is it perhaps something that we not doing and therefore not believing? This quandary is at the heart of the Season of Epiphany, making this Season a really critical Season of the Church Year.

Fair enough, Mr. Preacher. So, how do we address whatever self-doubt we might have? Funny you should ask. Here are three suggestions about how we can achieve the status of a Spirit-filled, joyful worker.

First, let's not put the whole burden of being joyful and successful on ourselves. We are not the Holy Spirit. We are vehicles of the Spirit. We don't work alone. We work in partnership. We don't power ourselves. We are empowered by God. And we are part of a team. And, if on one day, we are not joyful and successful, others on our team will be. We should be able to count on them, just as they should be able to count on us. Think of the best coach you've ever had, and then think of all the different talents that coach brought together, day by day. We are those talents when it comes to the Good News. We have God the Holy Spirit as our coach. All He needs are willing players. We are the team.

Second, let's accept the fact that the timetable of the Holy Spirit, and our efforts on behalf of that Spirit, are a mystery, if not all the time, at least some of the time. We can't be sure how God will use our efforts. We know only that God will use them, assuming we make those efforts. Don't look for or demand an immediate payoff. Who knows when something we say or do or warn against will make a positive difference in the lives of others. There might be people right now who consider us saints for things we did that we don't even remember. Our job is always to offer our best. God will take those offerings and make something good out of them.

And third, let's count our blessings, even when they seem few and far between. It's tough to engage the Holy Spirit in some kind of cooperative endeavor when we feel forgotten or ignored. "Woe is me" is not the attitude that the Spirit is looking for. If we feel short on blessings, let God know about it in prayer. We can be honest with Him. We can share our confusion, our disappointment, even our anger. And, when we do so, we might hear God respond: "Hey you! Remember what happened when I said 'Let there be light'? (**Genesis 1:1-5**) That's right. There was light, and there is light. So, take a deep breath, and get back to work. You'll feel better once you focus on others rather than yourself."

Tough love? You bet. But isn't the tough love of God our greatest blessing?

Like John the Baptist, we are mindful that we are not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of the sandal of Jesus (**Mark 1:4-11**). But, also like John, we need to remember that it's not our worthiness that counts. This is God's choice. And in

God's eyes, we are worthy. The one whose sandals we are reluctant to untie is the very one who washes our feet at the Last Supper. This dramatic act by Jesus should remind us that we are not alone as we seek to strengthen our personal faith. The more that we can accept that help, that presence, the joy in our hard work will increase to the benefit of others.

I think it's fair to call the Season of Epiphany the Season of Opportunity. We know what we're supposed to be about. We know that God has given us a badge that identifies us as a hard and joyful worker. But we also know that we can leave that badge on the dresser or we can put it around our neck and get to work. That's our choice.

Yes, we have our doubts. But we also have some reminders that these doubts can be eased. Maybe the three reminders we mentioned this morning aren't enough. So, let's try one more. Let's spend some time with someone we admire as a hard and joyful worker. We don't have to wait for such a person to ask "Is there anything I can do to help?" We can take the initiative and ask that person, "What's your secret for being a hard and joyful worker?" And we can be sure that the person will gladly respond. After all, it's a privilege to share one's faith.

We know people like this, individuals who appear comfortable in their own spiritual skin. But sometimes, even when we are really curious, we hesitate to ask them about their faith. Well, it's a new year. We're making some resolutions. Let's add another. This year I will ask for a sit-down with someone who seems to have a better grip on faith than I do. Probably only to find out that we are more alike than different.

Epiphany. The Season of Opportunity. A new year. Another chance for all sorts of interesting adventures, including strengthening our faith by listening to others share their faith and returning the favor. In this worshiping community, there's a lot of this sharing going on already. It's impressive and inviting. Can there be more sharing? Probably. Worth a try. To this end, our final hymn today will include this prayerful reminder: "O Jesus, while the star of grace impels us on to seek thy face, let not our slothful hearts refuse the guidance of thy light to use."

Amen.