

In the Spirit's way

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May 11, 2009

The reading from Acts offers a foretaste of Pentecost, only two weeks away. After Peter receives a [vision](#) telling him that nothing is unclean, the same revelation is given to the community—this is the movement of the Holy Spirit. The gift of God is poured out "even on the Gentiles." The people exhibit the visible signs of God's favor (tongues, praise), and Peter is moved to declare that "surely no one can stand in the way" of their being baptized in the name of Jesus (echoing [Gamaliel](#)).

How do we stand in the way of the Spirit's movement? How do ideology, prejudice and tradition lead us to resist what God is creating? As preachers, an honest response means confessing that at times we ignore the stirrings of new birth. At times we are fearful or derisive.

John's epistle strikes a continuing refrain: To love God is to keep God's commandments. In [Mudhouse Sabbath](#), Lauren Winner reflects on Judaism from her perspective as a Christian who was raised in the Jewish faith. She writes that "practice is to Judaism what belief is to Christianity." To love God is to keep the commandments, to repeat the practices of the faith.

This week's Gospel lesson echoes this: Jesus commands his disciples to love one another. The theme of love is prominent in John's Gospel and in the letters of John: God so loved the world. God is love. Since God loved us so much, we ought to love each other. Love one another as I have loved you.

Love is the core of the good news about the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. Although we are exposed to inferior models and descriptions of love at every turn, true love is worth recovering, both in the church and in the culture. For Christians it's about giving, about "laying down one's life for one's friends."

John redefines love as communion, the experience of community. But individualism presents a significant obstacle to community, say Robert Bellah in [Habits of the](#)

[*Heart*](#) and Robert Putnam in [*Bowling Alone*](#). In the longer narrative from which this week's gospel passage is taken, Jesus presents himself as the vine and us as the branches. We are connected, and the life that flows from the vine into the branches is a life of love.

There are no individual, solitary Christians. I cannot be a Christian without you, and you cannot be a Christian without me. God designed it this way. So a part of our conversion is into the communion, the believers, the household of God.

In [*Life Together*](#), Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes from a Nazi prison cell about the communion that we share with each other—and the temptation to take our life together for granted:

It is true that what is an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded by those who have the gift every day. It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brothers and sisters is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let the one who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let us thank God on our knees and declare: it is grace, nothing but grace that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brothers and sisters.