Be Filled with the Spirit… Giving Thanks Oct. 12, 2025
A Thanksgiving Weekend Baptism Service Devotional Ephesians 5:18-20

Well good morning, and happy Thanksgiving!

Certainly, we have much to thank God for, including the fact that we're celebrating 6 baptisms today! In the 9:30 service, Nora, Eleesa and Neisha will be baptized, and in the 11:30 service, Micah, Hope and Bradley will be taking the plunge.

Before we celebrate with them, I'd like to share a short reflection based on the passage Lisa just read from Ephesians. It's a text about being filled with the Holy Spirit.

It's quite fitting to speak about the Holy Spirit on a baptism Sunday, because baptism and the work of the Holy Spirit are tied closely together in scripture. When someone is baptized, they're declaring that they've been washed clean, given new life in Jesus— and that new life is the Spirit's work.

It's also quite fitting to speak about the Holy Spirit on Thanksgiving weekend, because Paul says that when we're filled with the Spirit, our lives overflow with *gratitude* to God.

And it's quite fitting to be speaking about the Holy Spirit at such a time as this, because God has been leading us—convincingly so— to especially emphasize the person and work of the Holy Spirit at Cornerstone as we prepare to move into our next era of ministry as a local church. I'll have more say more about that later.

But first, we must ask a fundamental question: "Who is the Holy Spirit?"

Well, Christians believe that the one true God exists in a loving community of three divine persons called the Trinity—*Father*, *Son* and *Holy Spirit*. So, the Holy Spirit is the third person of the divine Trinity—not a vague force or distant power but the personal presence of God himself, active in the world and in the hearts of all those who follow Jesus.

It is the Spirit who opens our eyes to Jesus, brings new life, and grows in us the likeness of Christ. He guides, comforts, convicts and strengthens us, empowering ordinary believers like us to live with extraordinary grace. Through the Holy Spirit, God is not just above us or beside us—he is *within us*, making us God's very temple, God's dwelling place.

This is what the apostle Paul is describing in our text: a life filled and animated by God's own presence. He begins with these words:

> Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit… [1]

Here Paul contrasts two ways of living—two ways of being *under the influence*, as it were. A person who's drunk is controlled by alcohol. A person who's filled with the Holy Spirit is under the influence of the very life of God within them.

[1] Ephesians 5:18 (NIV)

When he wrote these words about drunkenness, Paul likely had in mind something would have been quite familiar to the original readers of his letter to the church at Ephesus— the cult of Dionysus, who was the Greek god of wine and fertility. The worship of Dionysus was woven deeply into the religious and social fabric of that city. Followers of the Dionysus cult believed that intoxication opened the door to divine inspiration, so their rituals often involved excessive drinking until all self-control was lost. What followed was a frenzy of chaotic and often immoral behaviour, or as Paul puts it— *debauchery*.

But as New Testament scholar John Stott writes, for the Ephesian Christians, and for us, it would be "a serious mistake to suppose that to be filled with the Spirit of Jesus Christ is a kind of spiritual inebriation in which we lose control of ourselves." On the contrary, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul lists self-control as one of the distinguishing character traits of those who live "under the influence" of the Holy Spirit. "If excessive alcohol dehumanizes, turning a human being into a beast, the fullness of the Spirit makes us more human, for he makes us like Christ [who himself is the perfect human being]." [2]

And in our passage for today, Paul goes on to describe **two ways to live into the fullness of the Holy Spirit**:

- Singing
- Giving thanks

Let's take a look at each, starting with:

1. Singing

> Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord… [3]

Seeing as it's Thanksgiving weekend, let me see by show of hands how many of you are grateful to God for the music ministry here at Cornerstone? Whether vocalists, instrumentalists, or those who serve in technical and administrative roles in our worship ministry, this large team of gifted and dedicated people pours themselves into helping us sing our praises to the Lord each and every Sunday.

There is of course is much more more to worship than singing, but scripture nonetheless makes it clear that singing has always played a central role in the worship of God's people, and it still does.

In their worship, early Christians would sing p*salms* straight from the Old Testament. They would also sing *hymns* that had been more recently composed to celebrate the new life and eternal hope they had found in Jesus, the Messiah. Some of those Christ-hymns ended up being recorded in the very pages of the New Testament. In early Christian worship, people would also sometimes sing *songs from the Spirit*, which are thought to be freestyle "lyrics and melodies made up more or less on the spot by people freshly inspired by the Holy Spirit." [4]

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[2] John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians: The Bible Speaks Today*, p. 204-205.
[3] Ephesians 5:18-19 (NIV)
[4] N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*, p. 62.

Such singing is a spillover of the joy we experience at the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in and through our lives. It's evidence of the Spirit's fullness within us.

Songs of worship give us words to declare our praises and the cries of our heart to God— words that are (or at least should be) rooted in the sacred text of scripture. As such, worship through song also becomes one of God's ways of teaching us. As New Testament scholar N.T. Wright explains, music has always been an important part of building up the church in not only celebration, but also instruction. [5]

Melody and lyric carry truth beyond intellect, helping God's Word to dwell more richly in us, transforming our minds and shaping our hearts in Christ. The biblical truths of the songs we sing at church can work their way into our very souls and memories, where they continue to teach and strengthen us long after the music has stopped.

But what might be easy for us to miss in our text is the fact that such singing has two audiences. Yes, when we gather for worship we sing our praises to God, but we also sing to each other. As Paul puts it, we "speak to each other with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs."

Last Sunday during the worship service, Beth Nolson led us in a prayer that beautifully captured this very dynamic. Here's what she prayed:

> Father… thank you for the gift of collective worship, for the many voices that have joined together to worship you. For when my voice is weak, I hear the strong voice of the person beside me declaring what I need to hear. Thank you for this reminder that we are not alone, but that we are surrounded and upheld by community.

This is one of the reasons why it's so important to make a regular habit of showing up for Sunday worship. The other month, I spoke on Psalm 73, where Asaph describes how God lifted him out of a crisis of faith all because he showed up for worship with God's people, even though it was probably the last thing he felt like doing.

In today's passage, Paul's exhortation to be filled with the Holy Spirit is written in the present continuous verb tense. This means that being filled with the Spirit isn't a one-time event. The command is to *keep on* being filled— to be filled again and again— with the Spirit. And one of the ways we open ourselves to the continuous filling of the Holy Spirit is to keep on showing up for worship with God's people, actively singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God and to each other.

And listen—this is as true for those who aren't musically talented as it is of those who are. Even if you can't carry a tune to save your life, Paul makes it clear that it's not about that. It's about what's in your heart. That's what he means in verse 19 when he tells us:

> Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord…

Most of us will never be musicians like those who lead us on this stage, but all of us—even the least musical among us—can still make music to the Lord in our hearts. And the music of our hearts is what God delights to hear the most.

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[5] Ibid, p. 62.

So, singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs from our hearts to the Lord is both an *expression* of the Spirit's fullness in our lives, and it's also a God-given *means* by which we open ourselves to be filled again and again with the Spirit. To quote N.T. Wright again:

> Singing, whether aloud, or in your heart, [is] an excellent way of actually practising the faith. If you don't want your garden to grow weeds, one of the best ways is to keep it well stocked with strong, sturdy flowers, and shrubs. If you don't want your mind and heart to go wandering off into the realms of darkness, one of the best ways is to keep them well-stocked with wise and thankful themes, so that words of comfort, guidance and good judgement come bubbling up, unbidden from the memory and subconscious. [6]

This is why singing is one of the best ways of living into the fullness of the Holy Spirit. A second way is:

2. Giving thanks

> … be filled with the Spirit… always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. [7]

This Thanksgiving weekend, many Canadians (certainly not all— but many) will celebrate *abundance* — tables filled with food and homes filled with material blessings, for which we rightly thank God. But in our text, Paul reminds us that the greatest fullness isn't from food or things — it's the fullness of the Holy Spirit**.**

And a Spirit-filled person is, without question, a thankful person. Gratitude is the inevitable outflow of the fullness of God's presence within us in the person of the Holy Spirit. A former theology professor of mine, Gordon T. Smith, goes as far as to say that, "Nothing is so fundamental to the spiritual life as learning to give thanks." [8]

One New Testament scholar notes that many Christians lack appreciation for just how important the theme of giving thanks is throughout the New Testament. [9] For example, in a passage in Colossians that parallels the passage we're exploring today, Paul writes:

> And always be thankful. Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. [10]

In the following chapter, Paul goes on to say:

> Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart. [11]

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[6] Ibid, p. 63-64.
[7] Ephesians 5:18, 20 (NIV)
[8] Gordon T. Smith, *Spiritual Direction: A Guide to Giving and Receiving Direction*.
[9] Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians: The NIV Application Commentary*, p. 291.
[10] Colossians 3:15c-16 (NLT)
[11] Colossians 4:2 (NLT)

Another well-known New Testament text about of the importance of thanksgiving is found in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, where he says:

> Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus. [12]

Because a *grumbling* spirit is not compatible with the *Holy* Spirit. If you're familiar with your Bible, you'll remember that in the Old Testament, grumbling was one of the besetting sins of the people of Israel. In spite of all the Lord had done for them, they were always murmuring against the Lord and against Moses.

In Romans 1, Paul even suggests that sin is essentially ingratitude. Humanity's failure to thank God and recognize that he is the source of all good things is at the root of our fall into sin. He writes:

> For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. [13]

In contrast, a Spirit-filled follower of Jesus is full not of ingratitude or complaining, but of thanksgiving.

Having said that, let me offer an important qualifier when it comes to today's text. Again, Paul says:

> … be filled with the Spirit… always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. [14]

Some well-meaning Christians have taken the words "for everything" to mean that they should thank God even for blatant evil, tragedy and suffering. Listen: That's not what Paul is asking us to do!

We can and should thank God that he is at work to *redeem* evil, tragedy and suffering for the sake of his good purposes for us, in us, and through us. [15] Even in hardship, we can thank God that he is present and at work for good.

But that doesn't mean you and I are called to *thank* God for evil, tragedy and suffering as if they are somehow gifts from God. We know this because in our text, giving thanks "for everything" is qualified by the phrases "to God the Father" and "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." As New Testament scholar John Stott puts it, "Our thanksgiving is to be consistent with the loving Fatherhood of God and the self-revelation he has given us in Jesus Christ." Therefore, you and I are called to follow in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus by not by thanking God for evil and suffering, but by *resisting* evil, and doing all we can to *alleviate* suffering.

Any theology nerds in the house? Perhaps you guys have noticed the thoroughly Trinitarian way in which Paul has framed our text: When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, we give thanks to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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[12] 1 Thessalonians 5:18 (NLT)
[13] Romans 1:21 (NIV)
[14] Ephesians 5:18, 20 (NIV)
[15] Romans 8:28

Thanksgiving is not just a day or a weekend on the calendar. For the Christian, thanksgiving is a posture of the mind and heart. It's a way of life.

So let me challenge you to keep a gratitude log. Every day, list at least three things for which you can thank God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Write it out in paragraphs if you're a word person. Or if that's not you, just keep a simple bulleted list whether on paper or on your phone. Every day, add to your list, and spend some time reflecting on it and thanking God in prayer for what's listed. I dare say, there are few practices that more transforming than intentional thanksgiving.

Because gratitude is not only the overflow of our lives when we're filled with the Holy Spirit. It's also a spiritual discipline that keeps us open and receptive to the Spirit's filling, again and again.

And what fills you forms you. The Holy Spirit fills us to form us in the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Earlier, I mentioned that God has been leading us to make space to focus on the person and work of the Holy Spirit here at Cornerstone. May I share some more about that now?

Throughout the year, I've experienced a sequence of notable personal promptings in prayer suggesting that the person and work of the Holy Spirit should be especially emphasized at Cornerstone as the church enters a new era of ministry:

- The other week during the Executive Team's Vision Sunday talk, I shared how God impressed the word "wind" on my heart at the beginning of 2025. Of course, in scripture, "wind" is a metaphor for— *the Holy Spirit*.
- There were also two other separate occasions when a pair of doves suddenly appeared before me in very particular ways at very particular moments while I was in prayer. Of course, in scripture, the dove is a picture of—*the Holy Spirit*.
- I experienced yet another moment when I turned on a podcast while driving, not knowing that the subject of that day's episode would be all about—*the Holy Spirit*. And that podcast has turned out to be, by far, the most captivating and compelling teachings I've listened to this year.

That said, I'm not a believer in making plans for the church on the basis of personal promptings alone. So, I discussed it with various others on staff and in the congregation who shared that they, too, felt a sense of "rightness" or affirmation about making space to focus on the person and work of the Holy Spirit at this stage of the Cornerstone's journey—especially as we seek God's direction for, and get ready to enter into, a new era of ministry.

After all, scripture make it clear that is the Holy Spirit who empowers and moves the church into the world on mission for Jesus. And we need the same Spirit to move us into Cornerstone's future for the sake of God's mission in and through us. Whatever God call us to as a church, we must not rely on our own smarts, strength, effort or ability. Rather as God said to the prophet Zechariah, it is:

> "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord Almighty. [16]

And so, with all this in mind, next Sunday we will begin a sermon series about the person and work of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John, with more series on the Holy Spirit envisioned in the years to come.

[16] Zechariah 4:6 (NIV)

The filling of the Holy Spirit, you see, is not about one emotional moment, as some Christians believe. Rather, it is about a daily posture of openness to God's presence. A cup under a waterfall is in a constantly filled because it's constantly open.

Who here is ready to open yourself not only to learn more about the person and work of the Holy Spirit in the upcoming series, but to a fresh experience of his presence and fullness in your life, and in the life and mission of this church family?

When such fullness happens, our lives and our congregation will overflow with *singing* and *thanksgiving*.

And again, we give thanks for the work the Holy Spirit has done in the lives of our baptism candidates in leading them to this vital step of following Jesus. As Peter exhorted a large crowd on the day of Pentecost:

> "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." [17]

Indeed, after each candidate is baptized today, they will be anointed with oil as a sign of the Holy Spirit taking up residence in their hearts. Like wind, and like doves, oil is another biblical metaphor the Holy Spirit.

Speaking of our baptism candidates, I'd like to invite them up at this time. Let's give them a hand as they come!

9:30 - Nora, Eleesa, Neisha

11:30 - Micah, Hope, Bradley

Questions for Baptism Candidates

- Do you believe you are a sinner in need of a Saviour? If so, say, "I do."
- Do you believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins and rode from the dead so that you could have eternal life? If so, say, "I do."
- Do you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord? If so, say, "I do."
- Do you believe in your heart that God has raised Jesus from the dead? If so, say, "I do."
- Do you renounce Satan and all his works? If so, say, "I renounce them."
- Do you intend to follow Jesus the rest of your days? If so, say, "With all my heart."
- Do you accept God's summons to join him in his mission to restore this world in a way that fits the gifts, talents, and callings he gives you? If so, say, "I do."

At this time, we have the privilege of hearing testimonies from our baptism candidates, starting with Nora…

[17] Acts 2:38 (NIV)