

# The Spirit Chooses

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

May 28, 2023/Pentecost Sunday

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I want to begin my Pentecost sermon, naturally, by discussing the work of a German sociologist. 😊

That probably sounds like the opposite of “naturally.” But over the last six months or so, a number of people have mentioned the name Hartmut Rosa to me.

My typical pastoral strategy when someone says, “I have a book you should read” is to smile and say, “Well, yes, I will look into this.” When two people say it, I begin to think about *actually* looking into it. When it gets to three or four, I begin to wonder if God is trying to get my attention.

Lest you should think too highly of your pastor.

(Although, to be fair, a lot of people have books I “really should read.” Some kind of a triage system is necessary.)

I had never heard of Hartmut Rosa, but after these recommendations began to accumulate, I decided that it was time to investigate. I ordered his little book called *The Uncontrollability of the World*.

“Uncontrollability” is a bit of an awkward word, and the book can be a bit of a clunky read at times. I’m sure it’s better in German (maybe someone can read the original and let me know).

“Uncontrollability” is how Rosa decided to translate a German word *unverfügbarkeit*. That’s even more of a mouthful!

Rosa’s thesis is actually a very simple one, despite the fact that it’s couched in all kinds of academic language.

- The world is uncontrollable.
- The story of modernity is one of human beings' ever-increasing attempts to control the world.
- This is increasingly making us miserable.

Our mastery of science and technology has led to us having unprecedented powers over our reality. And so, increasingly, the world and our experience of it is not something to adapt or respond to, but to master and control.

A trivial example. Naomi and I purchased a 2011 Subaru this week. Consequently, I spent a good chunk of one afternoon trying to figure out how to get my phone connected to the car's Bluetooth system (a feature which my previous cars have not had, which tells you something about what I've been driving!).

I was not successful. And this was a source of great frustration and irritation to me. I spent all kinds of time Googling, watching videos, reading help forums, poring through the owner's manual. No luck.

After giving up yesterday morning and sitting down to continue writing my sermon, the laughability of my frustration became evident to me.

I was upset because I could not get the little computer that I carry around in my pocket, which contains thousands of hours of music and podcasts, all of my appointments, contacts, files, and which has the potential to access anything on the internet at any time—I could not get this device to communicate wirelessly with another computer built into a piece of highly sophisticated machinery that can transport me wherever I want to go at great speeds in a climate controlled environment where I am shielded from the elements at all times.

I believe this is what could be referred to as a “first world problem.”

The level of *control* over my environment that my frustration *assumed should be possible* was astonishing.

In modernity, according to Rosa, we expect this kind of control in virtually every area of life. He identifies six areas where this is the case.

**Birth.** pregnancy has moved almost entirely into the realm of what can be planned, managed, controlled. Eggs can be frozen, embryos implanted. We live in a world of

contraception and epidurals and in vitro fertilization and surrogate wombs. Even more terrifyingly, genetic material can increasingly be “edited,” with “problematic outcomes” eliminated in utero.

**Child-rearing and education.** Two words. “Helicopter parenting.” We increasingly think that if we manage all the inputs correctly, we will produce the perfect human widget. And so, parents seek to “optimize” with the perfect combination of athletics, music, and academics to get the end result we desire.

**Life-planning: relationships and careers.** Where education was once thought of at least in part as a having a role to play in character formation, it is now conceived almost exclusively as vocational training, almost like a contractual arrangement. It is a means to an end. In the world of relationships, we now shop for partners on apps that “match” human beings according to interests, etc. The chance encounter, the unpredictable connection are swapped out for a highly controlled process, often mediated by technology.

**Digitalization of our relationship to the world.** There are increasingly few things in our lives that are not affected, dominated, dictated by technology. Everything can be measured and monetized and sold to billionaires in Silicon Valley. This has destroyed our attention spans and probably our politics, but that’s another story.

**Aging and illness.** We fight aging in any way we can (there is an enormous market in anti-aging products!). Illness is conceived of as failure. Modernity has convinced us that our bodies are machines where if we just fiddle with the knobs and tweak the chemistry with the right pharmaceuticals, all shall be well. Until it isn’t. Which leads to..

**Dying.** Of course, increasingly we even want to manage and control how we leave this world. As we talked about in our MAiD forum earlier this year, there has been an explosion in people who say, “I will die on my terms.”

In each case, Rosa says, we think the world is controllable. We assume that it could or should be. But it’s not. And the more we try to control things, the more we see that this is the case.

There’s the unplanned pregnancy. The kid with all the right inputs who goes astray. The meticulously conceived career path that ends up taking a massive detour in mid-life. The perfect online match that ends in divorce. The realization that all the anti-aging

products in the world can't slow the march of time. And, of course, the final intrusion of death.

The world cannot be controlled.

I think the last few years have revealed to all of us how little we can actually control. Perhaps this is why people in my world were reading and recommending Rosa's book!

And, Rosa says, our lack of complete control is actually a good thing, something we should welcome.

I want you to think back to the most memorable moments of your life—or even beyond memorable “moments, to the events and circumstances and relationships that have shaped you, for good or ill, into the person you are today.

When were you most moved, most broken, most inspired, most transported and transformed?

My guess is that when it was in a situation that you *did* not and *could* not entirely control.

This has certainly been the case for me. Whether it's the story of how our family came together, or life-altering friendships, or an academic journey that started a bit late according to usual schedules, or a surprising path to being a pastor, or my most memorable moments in ministry...

All of it was outside of my complete control. All of it required me to adapting and respond to a reality where I was acted upon by forces that I could not perfectly manage or predict.

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Well, that was a lot of German sociology and not much Pentecost. What's the connection?

I think the point is an obvious one but is worth stating. Pentecost reveals to us—if we needed the reminder—that God is *unverfügbarkeit*. Uncontrollable.

At Pentecost, the Spirit descends, uncontrollably, upon the disciples. Tongues of fire. Fresh power and inspiration. The launching of the church into the world.

The disciples did not engineer Pentecost.

(I say this with the utmost respect for engineers. I am grateful for all the ways in which you allow us to exert limited control over our world!)

But there was no spiritual technique that the disciples finally mastered, no perfect calibration of prayers and service, no minimum threshold of good deeds reached which triggered the outpouring of God's spirit.

It was a gift, pure and simple. A surprising, completely unexpected interruption into business as usual.

This is true of all the decisive moments in the gospel story. Incarnation. Crucifixion. Resurrection. Ascension. Future return.

As Christians we are followers of a God who comes crashing into the story in unmanageable and surprising ways.

The Spirit descends at Pentecost. The Spirit gives birth to a community. And the Spirit gives gifts to a community.

This is what Paul says in our text this morning. The church is united by one Spirit. And the church is gifted by one Spirit.

After listing the various gifts that God has given, Paul says:

All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually ***just as the Spirit chooses*** (1 Cor. 12:11).

*The Spirit chooses.* I don't know how this sounds to you.

Maybe it sounds like God is a micromanager or a puppeteer. Maybe it sounds like we don't have much of a role to play. Maybe you're wondering where and how human freedom fits into all this.

It certainly flies directly in the face of the dominant cultural narrative that says that we can be whatever we want to be, that we are the captains of our own ship.

The idea that the Spirit chooses and gifts us completely apart from our choosing sounds unsettling.

But just as our lives take place in the interplay between our own choices and factors beyond our control, so the life of faith involves our actions in the broader context of God's initiatives.

And given all the ways in which human attempts to control the world and other people go awry in the world, often to devastating effects, I take comfort in the fact that it is God, not us, who has ultimate control.

The Spirit chooses to give gifts to the church. And we are not given gifts for our own benefit, but—again, very counterculturally—for the benefit of others and of the broader whole.

This is important.

You may have noticed that other people are also difficult to control. We can't make people do what we want them to.

We can encourage, attempt to persuade, we can try to correct, reroute, offer suggestions, etc. But other people remain stubbornly *other*.

This is as true in the church as it is anywhere else. People rub us the wrong way. Expectations are not met. We misunderstand and misinterpret. We disagree.

So often, we seek to control one another and realize that we can't.

And into all this, the uncontrollable Spirit of God gives gifts and says, "Use these to learn how to love each other well in this wild and beautiful world.

Use these to build one another up, to grow hope, to cultivate gratitude and trust, to learn to be open to the Spirit who blows where the Spirit blows, to support one another on the adventure of faith.

Pentecost reveals to us a God beyond our control. And thank God for this.

In Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, he says these words:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom  
(2 Cor. 3:17).

There is indeed freedom in not needing to manage and control, whether we're talking about other people or about God.

This is a hard lesson, but it is one that I think we must learn if we are to be mature followers of Jesus and healthy human beings.

May God help us to live in responsive freedom, as the sons and daughters of the living God, who cannot be controlled, but who instead can be loved, worshipped, followed and trusted beyond what we can predict or manage.

Amen.

