

“What In the World Do We Need the Holy Spirit For?”
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Day of Pentecost, Sunday, May 24, 2015
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Acts 2: 1-21

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.² And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. ³ And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

⁵ Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. ⁶ And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.

⁷ And they were amazed and wondered, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸ And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? ⁹ Par’ thians and Medes and E’ lamites and residents of Mesopota’ mia, Judea and Cappado’ cia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phryg’ ia and Pamphyl’ ia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyre’ ne, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹ Cretans and Arabians, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.”

¹² And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³ But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them,

“Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. ¹⁵For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day; ¹⁶but this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

¹⁷‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; ¹⁸yea, and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth beneath, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; ²⁰the sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and manifest day. ²¹And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

The Church is All of You

A true story from the hills of West Virginia.

Folks in First Christian Church learned that a local family was in need. Word was a mother had become bedridden and her three girls needed some attention.

So the Disciples Women circles got busy.

They made calls and established a relationship with the family. Homemade cakes and meals and greeting cards began to be delivered.

As arranged, on Sunday morning a minivan collected the girls and brought them to SS and worship.

The Disciples Women observed that the children were scrubbed, brushed and quite happy in their play clothes.

No one said a word aloud about their attire; it was a delight to have them.

For the next month of Sundays all was well.

Then on Saturday three Disciples from the east of town arrived bearing gifts,

gifts of new flowered dresses, hair ribbons, and shiny shoes

still in their boxes.

The next morning the minivan rolled up to collect the girls.

No one answered the door.

Maybe they had left to visit relatives.

The next Sunday the minivan stopped by

and, again, no one was home.

That Sunday afternoon the Disciples Women president knocked on the door.

The girls' mother greeted her warmly and exclaimed,

"Thank you, thank you for the pretty dresses and shoes! They fit perfectly.

As a matter of fact, my children looked so nice and dressed up that now they can go to the Presbyterian Church!"

Welcome to the Church of Jesus Christ, recipient of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Church is All of You

The late Archbishop Oscar Romero said on January 27, 1980:

"I repeat what I told you once before when we feared we might be left without a radio station:

God's best microphone is Christ,
and Christ's best microphone is the church,
and the church is all of you.

Let each one of you, in your own job, in your own vocation -- nun, married person, bishop, priest, high-school or university student,

workman, laborer, market woman –
each one of you in your own place live the faith intensely and feel that in your own surroundings you are a true microphone of God our Lord."

The Church is All of You

Today is the Day of Pentecost.

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.

²And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind,

and it filled all the house where they were sitting.

³And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them.

⁴And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Before we can assess what it means to be Church,
we must first understand what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

We start at the beginning...

"In the beginning
when God created the heavens and the earth,
the earth was a formless void
and darkness covered the face of the deep,
while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters."

"...a ruach from God swept over the face of the waters."

I made a new friend this week who told me her name was Roho,
which means spirit in Swahili.

We discussed that her name means spirit in Hebrew (ruach) and in Arabic (ruch).

All three languages have their genesis from neighboring lands and peoples.

We are one in the Spirit.

The Book of Genesis begins with the wind, the ruach, the breath of God

moving over the face of the waters,
carrying within its presence the power to create,
the power to bring order out of chaos,

the power to create something living
and light

where once there was a
formless void and darkness.

In the Gospel of Luke and throughout the Acts of the Apostles

– which are authored by the same person --

it is through the Holy Spirit that followers of Jesus
are clothed with power from on high.

Here we witness that the Holy Spirit gives people the power
to testify, forgive sins, heal, teach, strive for justice, preach,
and cast out demons.

Luke and Acts proclaim that the whole people of God
may be filled with this gift from on high.

In the Gospel According to John,

the names of the Spirit reveal its nature and nurture.

In John, the Holy Spirit is introduced to the disciples in the 14th
chapter,

when Jesus calls it the Spirit of Truth.

The Spirit of Truth acts as an advocate on our behalf.

The Spirit is an encourager and mediator.

You may also find other names for the Spirit of Truth:

Paraclete, Advocate, Comforter, Divine Helper, and Counselor
are names for the gift that Jesus asked God
to send to us to be present when Jesus is
absent.

According to John's testimony,

Jesus said that the Spirit is sent by God in Jesus' name;
it dwells in you and will be a living presence in you.

A paraclete is one who appears on another's behalf,

like a defense lawyer, or a mediator, or an intercessor.

In 1 John 2:1-2, Jesus himself is called a paraclete!

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may
not sin.

But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the [Creator],

Jesus Christ the righteous;

² and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins,

and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”

Flipping through the Epistles of the Apostle Paul,
we learn about Paul’s belief that God sent the Spirit
to claim us as children of God;
since we are children of God then, like Christ, we too are
heirs

-- heirs of the cross as well as the glory.

As well as coming to earth to claim us,
Paul preached that the Spirit intercedes on our behalf
“with sighs too deep for words.”

His faith proclaimed that we are to walk in the Spirit,
live in the Spirit, and set our minds on the Spirit.

The Church is All of You

These are but some experiences of the Spirit.
Your own is just as valid, just as real, just as authentic, just as holy
and blessed.

Buffy Calvert, my mother, observed that for her,
the Holy Spirit counterbalances God’s strength and creative
powers

by offering and providing for the universe
a more maternal, nurturing side to the Holy
Trinity.

Over the years I have absorbed these various understandings into my
spirituality.

I affirm that the Spirit of God which moved over the face of the
waters

is one and the same Spirit “in whom we live and breathe and
have our being.”

Just as God created and creates,
just as Jesus Christ reconciles and redeems,
the third “person” of the Holy Trinity
is the spiritual glue which binds us together,
one to another.

The Holy Spirit moves over the face of the human community,
drawing us in the Spirit's tether
and bonding disparate individuals into a covenantal
community
capable of doing and being a force of shalom,
a source of wholeness in a broken and
beautiful world.

The Church is All of You

Isabelle Herbig was a saint in our midst.
She was gentle, wise and witty.
When she was 93 years young she shared something she overheard
in her backyard.
Her next door neighbor was entertaining his 4 year old grandson.
The boy said, "Grandpa, do you still go to church school?"
He said, "Yes, I do."
"Gee, grandpa, I thought you would have learned it all by now!"

We have so much yet to learn and discern.
What in the world do we need the Holy Spirit for?

Cancel out the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church
and the first thing to depart the community of faith is the
word community.
Without the gift of the Spirit we would be reduced to one language,
a homogeneous clique
that wants the same thing,
in which everyone looks the same
and sounds alike
and votes as a bloc.

Congregations that decide not to wait for the Spirit, who choose not
to trust in the Holy Spirit
suddenly have an overwhelming urge
to proclaim a spirituality of materialism or nationalism
or asceticism.

In his book entitled On Being a Christian, Hans Kung implored the
Church, saying:

"We are to preach metanoia.
We must entice people from the world to God.
We are not to shut ourselves off from the world in a spirit of
asceticism,
but to live in the everyday world
inspired by radical obedience
that is demanded by the love of God.
The Church must be reformed again and again,
converted again and again each day,
in order that it may fulfill its task."

The Church is All of You

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission brought together a panel of
experts

from a variety of fields to consider what the NRC should do
about nuclear waste which remains radioactive for
10,000 years.

The NRC pointed out to the panel that we can warn people today
about where plutonium is stored;

how do we warn people 10,000 years from now?

The experts considered different types of walls and fences,
but realized that they fall and wear out over time.

Posted warning signs? Languages evolve and change and are
forgotten.

Governments and royal dynasties, as well,

often do not last more than a few centuries, at best.

At last the panel hit upon a solution which might last for ten
millenniums:

a priesthood.

A priesthood created and empowered for such a purpose

would believe in the importance of its message,

would share its message with the wider world,

and would teach its message from generation
to generation.

Neither the NRC nor the panel of experts followed through.

You see, a priesthood is created out of an experience of the holy.

In addition, the experience of the holy must be experienced
by each succeeding generation.

At the core of an encounter with the holy is the gift of the Spirit of
God.

The Church is All of You

The holy comes and encounters us, today, in the midst of our lives.
By this experience of the holy, we are commissioned to be a royal
priesthood.

By this experience the baptized are different -- set apart! --from the
world.

The church of Jesus Christ is holy because it is different,
set apart, set forth, set aside by God
as a visible and viable witness to the world.

"I repeat what I told you once before
when we feared we might be left without a radio station:
God's best microphone is Christ,
and Christ's best microphone is the church,
and the church is all of you." -- Oscar
Romero

Christianity is not a religion; it's a relationship.

Folks yoke themselves to the church

because they seek to draw closer to Jesus Christ and to the
whole people of God.

People want to be connected with the power of the Spirit of God!

This partnership, this communion, this spiritual connection

is founded on the spiritual promise

that we are invited to join in a holy relationship.

Without God as the center of our lives we wander,

disconnected from all that has meaning and hope.

People seek a relationship with God,

which in turn enables them to be connected with themselves,

their families and friends, and the wider community.

God seeks a relationship with God's people.

This relationship is grounded in the promise of covenant,
is explored in prayer and worship, and explodes in mission.

The Church is All of You

A Pentecost-like experience is seen in John Sayle's film *Matewan*.
Matewan is the story of a strike and shootout
at a West Virginia coal mine in the 1920's.

When pacifist union organizer Joe Kenahan comes to town
he finds terrible disunity.

The native West Virginia strikers are angry at the Italians,
imported by the mine owners as strike breakers.

When the Italians, former shoemakers, prove inept at mining,
the owners bring north African-American families from
Alabama.

Joe Kenahan is a true Christ figure
even though he claims no religious affiliation.

Joe talks to all three groups of people
– the local miners, the Italians, and the folks from Alabama –
into joining together.

Their growing unity is symbolized in the film by music.

A local fiddler listens to an Italian playing a haunting tune,
and then takes it up and joins in the song.

And then an African-American joins in on his
harmonica.

The three musicians are soon performing in
perfect harmony.

We see a West Virginian mother take food to the home of an Italian
family

whose children are hungry and have nothing to eat.

The hungry and grateful family invite their newfound savior to stay
and eat with them.

Even though they speak different languages,

when they sit down together to break bread,

they are able to communicate

because they do understand the language of

love,
the practice of radical hospitality,
and the gift of divine grace
that overcomes evil
and separation.

As is true in most social change movements,
the men follow the women's lead,
and they do so by beginning to teach one another the
game of baseball.

As bread is broken and baseballs are tossed and caught and smiles
are shared,

we see that not only is it possible for the language of love
to overcome the barriers of prejudice and greed,
it is the only thing that does.

Has the Church really been given the gift of understanding?

Is this a gift we really want?

Or is this a gift we tried to give away or give back to God?

Does the Church want to be a channel of spirit-filled dialogue
in the midst of cultural diversity?

Do we seek to be a conduit for reconciliation and righteousness
grounded in what we share in common,
rather than in some neurotic need to be silent and
safe and passive?

Does the church of Jesus Christ today
have what it takes
to dare to be a conduit of understanding and grace in
action?

Or are we fearful, afraid of failure, afraid of being told no, afraid of
loss,

afraid of controversy, of making ripples, even afraid of fear
itself...?

...so afraid we refuse to use the gift of grace
that is dancing and alit in our souls!

What would happen if we took a risk
and let the miracle of understanding
come alive again,

letting the Holy Spirit take over,
open our ears and hearts and doors and then see
what happens.

Can you imagine that?

Imagine that!

Can you imagine that maybe, just maybe the Holy Spirit
will help us to listen as well as to speak the truth in love
in the midst of diversity and division and Decatur?

Can you imagine the world around us hungering, thirsting, dying,
being born again from above, grateful for this gift?

The Spirit of understanding is given to the whole people of God.

“The Spirit does not speak a different message
for each spiritual seeker – you find your truth and I’ll find
mine.

A quest for spiritual truth
that would isolate us from our neighbors
is flawed at the outset.

The miraculous gift of Pentecost
resides in our discovering our commonality.”

(New Proclamation, Page 77)

The Church is All of You

The Good News is that the power of the Holy Spirit
inflamed but did not consume a burning bush in front of
Moses,

to whom God said to “Let My People Go.”

Rejoice that the Spirit visited a virgin named Mary who was betrothed
to Joseph,

and she responded, saying, “Let It Be.”

Praise God because the power of the Spirit
led Jesus to the River Jordan and then out into the desert,
then on to Nazareth, Jerusalem, the Cross and
beyond.

Sing alleluia for the Spirit rushed in like a mighty wind
on the day of Pentecost and birthed the church.

Offer a prayer of thanksgiving that today and tomorrow
the Spirit of God shall move
over the face of the calm waters and turbulent seas
of your life and mine.

The Holy Spirit is in the Church
and "the church is all of you."

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!