

## ***Let the Spirit Be Unleashed!***

Acts 2:1-21

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Today is Pentecost Sunday, the day on which we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit for the disciples. The book of the Acts of the Apostles, in which we find the story of the first Pentecost, might as well be referred to as the book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit, for truly everything that takes place from here on out has the Holy Spirit as the major player, even if it's not always named in every story. The truth is, the growth of the Christian Church can only be attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit; without the work of the Holy Spirit, I don't know how the Church ever would've gotten off the ground, because certainly the kind of people Jesus called to follow him in the gospels weren't strong enough or capable enough to get the Church going.

So why do we not hear very much about the Holy Spirit? Some have called the Holy Spirit the "shy member of the Trinity." Why do you think this is so? This is especially true in mainline Western protestant denominations, in which we not only find the Holy Spirit not acknowledged very prominently, but even pushed to the side and given a token minor role in the work of the Trinity. William Willimon, who was at one time the dean of the chapel at Duke University, was asked by a professor leaving the worship service, "Why don't you ever talk about the Holy Spirit?" That question became the basis of a very tongue-in-cheek article Willimon later wrote about the Holy Spirit. In that article, Willimon said:

"The risks and pitfalls of working with the Holy Spirit are so great that it is better, in our preaching, to work alone!... The Holy Spirit, in my dealings with [it], tends to be pushy, assertive, antagonistic, and imperialistic. It is the nature of the Holy Spirit to want to take over wherever [it], intrudes. The Holy Spirit seems to abhor a vacuum, and frankly, many churches on Sunday morning are vacuumous..."

He continues, noting that one of the reasons we are fond of liturgy is to limit the opportunity for the Holy Spirit to intrude upon our worship services. If we didn't have a tight liturgy, Willimon suggests, "it is difficult to predict where we might be by noon. And we preachers have a solemn duty always to stay with the flow, to assure our congregations that a chief pastoral role is to protect them from unwarranted, potentially divisive intrusions of the Divine."

Finally, Willimon notes that congregations that invite the presence of the Holy Spirit can be a bit unruly: "I have seen otherwise contained and cautious congregations get loose, lurch to the left, even begin to shout, stamp their feet, and throw all caution to the wind at the instigation of the Holy Spirit... The Holy Spirit likes nothing better than to take a

perfectly decent and decorous Service of Worship and transform it into some sort of heart-happy out of control hootenanny.”<sup>1</sup>

I think it's for some of those very same reasons that some have accused the Presbyterian Church of doing all we can to keep the Holy Spirit outside the doors on Sunday morning. It is the unpredictability of the Holy Spirit that makes us nervous. It is the Holy Spirit's propensity to instigate change that invokes terror in our hearts.

I'm reminded of the story of when God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were talking about their plans for summer vacation. God the Father said, "I'd like to go to the Rocky Mountains, because they are so majestic, and I feel so uplifted whenever I visit that place." Jesus the Son remarked, "I think I'd like to go back to the Holy Land, things are so tumultuous there, maybe I can help bring some peace." When they asked the Holy Spirit where it would like to spend its vacation, the Holy Spirit replied, "I'd like to go somewhere I've never been. That's why I've decided to spend the summer visiting Presbyterian Churches."<sup>2</sup>

I have to be honest, I take issue with some of these stereotypes of mainline protestants. For the truth is, the Holy Spirit is every bit as present in a well-ordered liturgy as it is in a free-flowing service. The Holy Spirit is every bit as operative when someone writes a sermon word for word, as when a person uses no notes at all. The Holy Spirit moves the heart just as much when music comes through a pipe organ as when it is played with guitars and drums.

But I do agree with at least one premise of the stereotypes, and that would be that there is a sense that we are tempted to resist the urging and prodding of the Holy Spirit. I suspect that has something to do with the fact that the Holy Spirit is an agent of change, that the Holy Spirit doesn't let us rest quietly in the status quo, that the Holy Spirit does make us consider ways that God might be at work that we otherwise would never imagine.

Maybe we don't want other people to look at the way we exercise our faith, and have them observe that we must be drunk from new wine.

But resist it though we may, we need the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised that he would send us the Holy Spirit upon his departure, and he made that promise because he knew we were going to need divine inspiration and empowerment in order to continue what Jesus had started. Jesus knew that if the eleven remaining disciples and the other unnamed followers found in the gospels were going to be able to proclaim the gospel of the reconciling love of Jesus Christ, then they were going to need help. If there was any hope for the successful transmission of the message of salvation to all people, then our Lord would have to continue to be involved. And he is involved by being present to us through the Holy Spirit.

It is the Holy Spirit that empowers and inspires us to continue the work of Christ in his absence. It is the Holy Spirit that guides us in the truth. It is the Holy Spirit that convicts us of our sin. It is the Holy Spirit that comforts us and assures us of the presence of God, because the Holy Spirit is the means by which our

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<sup>1</sup> William Willimon, "Overcoming Pentecost in Our Preaching: Proclamation without Spirit," *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2001, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> This joke was adapted from an article written by Nora Tubbs Tisdale, "The Wind that Blows the Doors Off," *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2003, pp. 55-61.

Lord is present to us. It is the Holy Spirit that opens our minds and our hearts and breaks through the hardness of our sin and turns us toward Christ as our redeemer and our Lord.

There are so many things that can be said about the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer and in the life of the Church of Jesus Christ. Authors and scholars have written countless volumes about the Holy Spirit. But in terms of this morning's lesson from the book of Acts, there are two significant things that we need to know about the Holy Spirit.

First is that it is the Holy Spirit that enables us to proclaim the gospel of Christ. Jesus commanded his believers to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey all that he has commanded.<sup>3</sup> And it is the Holy Spirit that enables us to fulfill that commission.

That's half of what happened on that first Pentecost. The disciples and other followers of Jesus were together in Jerusalem. And when the Holy Spirit came upon them with a mighty wind and with tongues of flame, this rag-tag group of ordinary men and women were suddenly empowered to communicate the wonders of God in Jesus Christ in ways that were otherwise humanly impossible. The people were suddenly divinely empowered to speak in languages of all the nations of the people who had come to Jerusalem to observe the feast. It was the Holy Spirit that empowered the people to proclaim the gospel.

The second thing that happened on that first Pentecost was that the same Holy Spirit that empowered the disciples to proclaim the gospel in other languages also empowered those who listened to the disciples to hear the message of Christ in such a way that they could understand and embrace the gospel. Each one heard the wonders of God being proclaimed in their own language.

Simultaneously the Holy Spirit enabled both the proclamation of the gospel to the ends of the earth, and the hearing of the gospel message by the ends of the earth. It is the Holy Spirit that compels us to share the good news of Jesus Christ to people not like you and me. It is the Holy Spirit that invites the alien and the slave and the outsider to come and experience the grace and love of Jesus Christ.

It is the Holy Spirit that communicates the gospel to a world that otherwise cannot understand—a world that cannot understand God, and a world whose inhabitants cannot understand one another. The Holy Spirit is what breaks down those walls and enables understanding between people and God and between people and one another.

The story is told of a Vietnamese woman who was waiting her turn to be examined in a crowded hospital emergency room. She gradually became aware of a frustrating “non-conversation” being attempted a few seats down. A nurse was trying to ask a new patient for some details on her illness. The patient spoke Spanish. The nurse did not.

The Vietnamese woman listened for a minute then realized that while she didn't speak Spanish she did understand the broken-English bits and phrases the Spanish speaking patient offered as answers. Because of her own experience of learning to communicate in “broken English,” the Vietnamese woman could hear the heart and gist of what this other woman was trying to say. The Vietnamese woman offered to “translate” the broken English of the Spanish speaker into something the nurse could understand. She

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 28:18-20

was so successful at bridging the brokenness of their languages that eventually the Vietnamese woman was hired by the hospital as a kind of generic translator.

My friends in Christ, the Holy Spirit is our translator. It is the Holy Spirit that enables us to put the gospel into words that make sense. And it is the Holy Spirit that translates the gospel message into a form that all can understand.

The Holy Spirit is the power of God at work in us and among us and through us. It is a frightening thing to think of what might happen when we let the Spirit be unleashed, for change will happen, and our world will be transformed.

Still, let the Spirit be unleashed.

Let the Spirit be unleashed in us and among us and through us, so that we can speak of the reconciling power of Christ's love to those who find themselves shunned and exiled in the barren and harsh wilderness of this world.

Let the Spirit be unleashed in us and among us and through us, so that we can proclaim a message of hope and assurance to a world that despairs over what it perceives as the victory of evil.

Let the Spirit be unleashed in us and among us and through us, so that we can offer a message of love and welcome to a world marked by hatred and enmity and incivility and division.

Let the Spirit be unleashed in us and among us and through us, so that we can boldly open doors that have been closed by intolerance and knock down walls that have been erected by fear of differences, so that all people will be able to know the Christ we are proclaiming.

Maybe Willimon was onto something. He's right when he says that the Holy Spirit will turn our world upside down. He's right when he says that the Holy Spirit will wrestle the control out of our hands. He's right when he says that the Holy Spirit will stir things up and make our lives less predictable. He's right when he says the Holy Spirit will make us broaden our understanding of the ways that God will work in the world.

But in spite of all the things we're afraid the Holy Spirit will make us be and do, still I say today: Let the Spirit be unleashed. And let's enjoy the ride! Amen.