

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
May 28, 2023
Acts 2:1–8
1 Corinthians 12:1–13

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God's Spirit.

Come Holy Spirit! Come with the power of a great wind, to clear out the cobwebs of our hearts, or come stealthily, as close as our own breathing, to whisper your truth into the silence of our lives. However you come, come with the power to change us that we might truly become the body of Christ in the world. Amen.

Today, we celebrate the Festival of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost is when the Christian Church recognizes the power and work of the Holy Spirit. This Sunday may be considered the end of the season of Easter. It is a time where the promise of the resurrected Jesus to not abandon us is fulfilled. Even though Jesus is not physically present with us, he promised to always be with us, and the Holy Spirit is the way given to us to feel God's presence and support. It is the Holy Spirit that gifts us to do the work of Christ in the world. Today, we have two readings to celebrate this day. The first is the story of Pentecost, and the second is from Paul's letter to the Corinthians as he describes the work of the Holy Spirit in the community of faith. Listen for a word from God.

Acts 2:1–8

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?”

1 Corinthians 12:1–13

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts

of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

We don't talk a lot about the Holy Spirit in our tradition. I think because it makes us nervous. When someone talks regularly about the Spirit, they are more apt to be exuberant, over-the-top, emotional, and in your face; or maybe they even speak in tongues and shake or faint when they worship. People talk about Holy Ghost power, and it makes us nervous. We like to talk about the Spirit not so much in those terms, but many of us might describe the Spirit as that gentle voice that nudges us along or the comforting presence when we are alone where we know we are in the presence of God.

While the Holy Spirit is certainly a comforting presence, a reminder of the love that God has for us, a reminder that God is always with us, the Spirit also functions to remind us of what God, through Jesus, has taught us and commands of us. Jesus is not just asking God to provide the disciples, and all of us who follow him, with a spiritual best friend who is there for us in times of comfort, but also for a powerful spirit that will remind us of the things Jesus taught, and an abiding force that gives us the strength to follow, to obey, and to speak and act in the name of Jesus.

In the story from Acts, the disciples are in a room in Jerusalem. This time they are waiting. The events of Easter have come and gone. Jesus has been tried, executed, and died, but the good news of his resurrection is already known by the disciples. Jesus has appeared to them. He has told them to wait in Jerusalem because in only a short few days they will receive the Holy Spirit, and when that happens Jesus says, the disciples will become his “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

So, the obedient disciples are waiting, waiting for this Spirit that they have been promised. This spirit that will be with them and that will give them the power to be witnesses throughout all the earth to the magnificence and love of Jesus Christ.

It is the day of Pentecost, a religious holiday where Jews from all over have come to gather to give thanks for the harvest. It is party, a festival where people gather to celebrate and have a good time and give thanks to their God.

While all of this celebration is going on the disciples are sitting in a room just waiting, when suddenly a great wind comes and fills the whole house. Not only wind, but then what appears as fire comes in and alights on each one of them, which causes them to speak in foreign languages. This creates such a commotion that people milling around outside hear this and go to investigate this noise and they are amazed and bewildered.

I imagine that several visitors have stopped by the place the disciples are staying to see if they can get a glimpse of this group and when they hear a commotion, they come running. As each person in the crowd hears their own language and recognizes that it is coming from someone who shouldn't speak their language, they are perplexed, and wonder what this means. The story goes on to tell us of Peter who gives a sermon and talk of the events and the meaning of Jesus life, death, and resurrection. Acts

tells us that because of Peter's sermon about 3000 were baptized and added to their number. Peter's words have done this.

Remember this is Peter, the one whom Methodist Bishop William Willimon, has said is the one, "who only followed at a distance... whom the maid drove to utter terrible words, 'Woman, I do not know him.' We left him weeping in the courtyard, a disciple tested and found wanting... yet here, before the half inquiring, half mocking crowd, Peter is the first, the very first to lift up his voice and proclaim openly the word that only a few weeks before he could not speak, even to a serving woman at midnight."¹ This is nothing short of the power of the Holy Spirit at work. This Spirit that Jesus promised his disciples in the Upper Room has shown up and made possible what was seemingly impossible.

If Jesus, in that Upper Room weeks before would have described to the disciples what the power of the Spirit did on the day of Pentecost to them instead of the lovely and comforting language of providing an Advocate who will remain with you always, if he would have told them that they would speak before thousands of people and cause them to believe, I'm not sure how many of them would have been sitting around in a room in Jerusalem waiting for this to happen. I'm not sure how many of us would be sitting and waiting for such a Spirit. And if I'm completely honest, I'm not sure how many of us hope that a powerful Spirit like that will show up now in our lives. That personal still small voice or comforting presence in the time of trouble is a little more manageable than this untamable and powerful force that may cause us to do things in a very public way.

But this is precisely what the story in Acts points us toward. One writer says, "To those in the church today who regard the Spirit as an exotic phenomenon of mainly interior and purely personal significance, the story of the spirit's descent at Pentecost offers a rebuke. [The story] goes

to great pains to insist that this outpouring of the Spirit is anything but interior. Everything is by wind and fire, loud talk, buzzing confusion, and public debate. The Spirit is the power which enables the church to ‘go public’ with its good news, to attract a crowd and... to have something worth saying.”ⁱⁱ The Spirit is a powerful force in our lives.

Paul talks about the power of the Holy Spirit through the giving of gifts for the common work of ministry. Often, it is difficult for people to think about being gifted. Or others think that you have to be super special to be gifted. One of my favorite preachers, Nadia Bolz-Weber, talks about our misunderstanding that being gifted means that someone is naturally better at something in a way that most people aren’t. She writes, “like you’d never say, ‘wow, Bob, is really gifted at breathing oxygen’ because being gifted means having a special ability that not everyone has.” Which makes sense on one level, but I believe that thinking misses Paul’s point.

It’s not like we expect that someone has to be super-gifted at something in order to be a part of the church. Or like we hold people with certain gifts higher than others. In fact, Paul says just the opposite of this.

Yes, we all have our unique gifts, but we are all gifted. When Paul is talking about gifts in Corinthians, he always uses the plural. He is using the word *charismata*, a variety of gifts. While there is the one body, that is the many members that make up the whole church, it is a variety of gifts that are given to the people in the church and no specific spiritual gift is better than another.

Even though we are a part of the one body, there is a world of difference when it comes to the expression of our faith in talents and avenues of service. There are scores of activities that make up the life of a church. If you were worshipping last week, this was evidence as I named a variety of activities and asked people to stand. Pretty much the entire church

was standing. No one talent, or avenue of service or activity is better than the other. We need all of us to do our part.

Paul goes out of his way to say that even though there is a variety of gifts, the same Spirit is behind the gifts. And though there are all kinds of ways to serve, it is the same Lord we are serving. There are so many activities in the life of the church, but it is the same God who makes all of them work.

All of us have a stake in this. None of us has been excluded from the “giftedness” God bestows on all who call Jesus Lord. And the reason that we have these gifts is incredibly important. The key phrase in Paul's letter is this: “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” The common good. God's Holy Spirit gives each one of us a unique gift for the good of all of God's creation. Paul points us beyond our little bitty activities to the grand scheme of what God is doing in the world. We cannot talk about gifts of the Spirit without talking about serving Jesus Christ. And we cannot talk about serving Jesus Christ without contending with the God who has first called the world into being, and who will finally reclaim all things, in everyone, and who cared so much about us that God showed up in flesh and blood. In the reign of God, there is no distinction between personal life and public life. There is no separation of “spiritual things” from the matters of this world, whether they be family life, local economy, national politics, or global suffering.

Friends, in following Jesus, in loving Jesus, we keep his commandments, remember what he has taught us, and we are his witnesses in Bloomington, in the Twin Cities, in Minnesota, and to the ends of the earth. If this makes you nervous, remember Peter. Remember the disciple that first denied Jesus in the dark of night, and then with the power and support of the Spirit was able to speak to thousands. Because

of this spirit our ancient brother was able to proclaim to the world that which made a difference in his life.

I'm not suggesting that each of us need to speak before thousands, but I am saying that we need to rely on God's gracious gift of the Spirit to help us speak about the ways in which God has brought meaning to our lives, the ways in which we have encountered the divine, the ways in which we have seen the love of Christ. We need to use the gifts that we are given and use them for the common good of all. We need to step away from a merely personal faith into a public faith. We need to trust that the Spirit is powerful enough that we can give our testimony to others, that we can believe we are gifted for good works, and trust God will lead us in what to say and do.

It is by this testimony and by using our gifts that others who may not know God may also come to believe and that we and others that already believe will come to know God in a deeper way. I think people are actually curious and interested about God. And if we love God, it should be easy for us to talk about God.

And it is in telling the ancient story of God as told to us in scripture, and our own story of how God works in our lives, or where we have witnessed God working in the lives of others that we begin to encounter God. It is in acting through our gifts for the common good when people see our lives as something unique. By sharing our own stories of transformation, and by living lives of transformation, we open the way for others to be transformed as well.

When we are empowered by the Holy Spirit and live into our giftedness, when we are bold enough to act, when we are able to talk about where we encounter God in our birthing and maturing, in our failings and healings, our commitments and loves, our eating and our dying, in our worship and working, in all of those places of our everyday lives where

we encounter God, when we talk of these things we are able to show people the majesty and love and the power of the Holy Spirit.

So let us trust in the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us speak of our love for God in a public way. Let us proclaim the good news to any that will hear. Let us live lives of service using the gifts God has given us. Let us answer those who are wondering what these followers of Christ might say and do next. Let us be open to the abiding force of the Holy Spirit that will remind us of the things Jesus taught, and gives us the strength to follow, to obey, and to speak and act boldly in the name of Jesus Christ. Let us all receive the Spirit that is the power which enables the church to ‘go public’ with its good news, to attract a crowd and... to have something worth saying” and doing.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Willimon, *Interpreters bible Commentary Acts*, page 31

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p. 33

ⁱⁱⁱ Willimon, p. 33