

PENTECOST: THE GIFT OF GOD'S SPIRIT

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Post Christian and Presbyterian Churches

Acts 2:1-11

John Buchanan, Pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, tells the story of a woman who was a devoted member of a Pentecostal Church who happened to visit a Presbyterian Church one Sunday while she was out of town on business. He said, "She was greeted, rather formally, she thought, by a very dignified usher who showed her to a pew. She sat down to participate in worship, which being Presbyterian, was proceeding decently and in order. She was a little perplexed by the passive behavior of the worshippers and by how quiet the worship service was for her. She reported later that the whole experience felt much too formal and rigid. However, when the minister got up to preach, she liked what he was saying, so she began to respond by saying, "Amen!" and "Yes, Lord!" and "Preach it brother!" People in the pew in front of her impulsively turned around to stare and the woman beside her nervously slid further away from her in the pew. Suddenly the usher who had seated her, appeared at her side and asked, "Ma'am, is there something wrong?" "Why no," the startled woman said, "there's nothing wrong, I've just got the spirit!" And the usher responded nervously, "Well, you certainly didn't get it here!"

The church usher who proudly assured the woman that she did not find the Holy Spirit in his church speaks for all of us more reserved, orderly, and liturgically correct Christians who would have been most uncomfortable if by chance we happened to be in the room on that first Pentecost day. We educated, mainstream Christians are much more comfortable ignoring the whole subject of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, especially the kind of outpouring that occurred at Pentecost. It sounds so unsophisticated, so irrational, so emotional, and entirely out of control.

We are told that on the day of Pentecost, “first there was wind, then there was fire, and then they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Devout Jews from all over the world stood in the doorways and windows, listening to a bunch of Galileans tell about the power of God in their own tongues so that no one was left out.” According to the book of Acts, three thousand people were baptized that day. It was a miracle. It was the birthday of the Christian church, when a dozen bumblers received power from on high and then proceeded to turn the world upside down. All who were present for this holy occasion were in the grips of a power beyond themselves, something that totally bypassed reason, tradition, and most likely their comfort level. **(Referenced from Barbara Brown Taylor)**

I have to admit that when I hear people talk about speaking in tongues or being slain in the Spirit, I begin to squirm and feel more than a little out of place. If I am forced to talk about the Holy Spirit with some one, then I talk with great authority about the Spirit who is with us always, the Spirit of peace and comfort, the one that smoothes our ruffled feathers and revives our weary souls. This is the manifestation of the Holy Spirit that brings me great comfort and probably also serves to keep me comfortable within the confines of my limited vision of faith and God.

However, the manifestation of the Holy Spirit that visited the disciples and the Jews gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost is not nearly as comforting or as inviting. This is the same manifestation of the Spirit that visited Job in the whirlwind and Ezekiel in the chariot of fire. This is the Spirit who blows and burns, howling down chimneys, knocking out sky lights and turning all of our lawn furniture upside down, like the West Texas wind and hail that has begun it's season of rampage. Ask Job about the whirlwind or Ezekiel about the chariot of fire. Ask anyone who was in that room on Pentecost what it was like to be caught up in the Spirit, and whether it is something they would like to happen every Sunday afternoon.

Alan Jones, the Dean of the Episcopal Cathedral in San Francisco says, “Only a fool would pray for the Holy Spirit to come into his or her life.” Jones suggests that the Spirit is most present at three open spaces in our lives: in the unpredictable, in the place of risk, and in those areas over which we have no control.”

That is where the disciple were 2000 years ago on the day of Pentecost and that is where we are more times than we care to admit. When we find ourselves in these scary places, it is no crime to pray for the gentle Spirit to restore predictability, to remove us from harm and risk, and to give us back the comfortable illusion of control that helps us to sleep at night. But Pentecost is our reminder that there is another side to God’s spirit; one that can set us on fire, transform our lives, and turn the world upside down for us. It is not predictable. It is very risky and it is completely beyond our control. (References from Barbara Brown Taylor)

In the book, **My Grandfather’s Blessing**, Dr. Rachel Remen talks about the things she has observed in her years of being a physician that medical science can never explain. She said, “I have learned that many very important things cannot be measured and predicted but only observed, witnessed, and ultimately trusted. Life may not

always be limited by the facts. Science defines life in its own way, but sometimes life is larger than science.”

Dr. Remen reported that a friend of hers was the director of research at a nonprofit institute and had become interested in studying the spontaneous remission of cancer. As his interest became more widely known, people would call or write to tell him their stories of unexplained recovery from serious illness. One of these was a young man who claimed to have had a spontaneous healing from a dire form of bone cancer called osteogenic sarcoma. He had been diagnosed many years ago as a college student. Noticing a hard lump in his right thigh, he had gone to see a doctor. A biopsy had confirmed the doctor’s suspicion of cancer, and he and his parents had been called to a meeting. Sadly, the doctor told them of his findings and strongly recommended that he have his right leg amputated at the hip. He was nineteen years old. Despite the urging of several doctors and his parents, he had refused this surgery and had gone home to his parents’ farm without any treatment to live out his life. Nothing further had been done for him except that the pastor of his church had asked those people who were so moved to pray for him at seven o’clock every night. People prayed for two years. Over time, the mass in his thigh had simply grown smaller and finally disappeared.

Dr. Remen said that her friend was captivated by this story and asked her to help him track down the doctor who had made the original diagnosis to see if he would confirm this story and perhaps even share the original medical records and biopsy report. Finding him turned out to be a relatively easy task and so Dr. Remen decided to call him herself. She said she introduced herself and explained the purpose of her call. “His response was immediate. ‘Of course I remember him,’ he said with great feeling. ‘I’ve thought of him many times over the years. Are you calling on behalf of his family?’

‘No,’ Dr Remen replied and told him that the man was still alive. ‘Thank God,’ he said. ‘Where did he have his surgery?’ ‘He did not have surgery,’ she said. There was a pause. When he spoke again, Dr. Remen said she could detect a change in his voice. ‘Then what happened?’ he asked. So she told him the story as it had been told to her. There was a long silence and then, without another word, he hung up the phone. Dr. Remen said she called him several times afterward, but he never returned her calls.

She said, “Most of us encounter a great deal more Mystery than we are willing to experience. Sometimes knowing life requires us to

suspend disbelief, to recognize that all our hard-won knowledge may only be provisional and the world may be quite different than we believe it to be. This can be very stressful and even frightening. But if we are not willing to wonder and be open to what lies outside our understandings and comfort levels, then we may have to hang up the phone on life and faith.”

The story of Pentecost is a reminder that God is actively present in our lives and in the life of the world. Pentecost also reminds us that we are not alone, that we are not always in control of the agenda and that God continues to come into life in unexpected and sometimes unreasonable ways. Pentecost illustrates that God comes to all kinds of people in ways that make some of us quite nervous because it goes beyond our level for comfort and comprehension. On this Pentecost Sunday, we are challenged to make friends with the Holy Spirit of Pentecost- to listen for that unconventional and uncomfortable voice of God in our midst and to follow. It is this Holy Spirit that challenges our will, our motivations, and our great need to be in control.

Several years ago, when William Faulkner received the Nobel Prize in Stockholm, he gave a speech praising the human spirit. He said words to this effect, “I believe in the ultimate victory of the human

spirit.” The human spirit can be one of our best attributes as individuals and as a community. But, it can also be our greatest challenge as Christians and as a church as the human spirit often keeps us from being willing to see and to hear and to feel the Holy Spirit moving among us. The human spirit and the Holy spirit: at times they have been at odds and resisted one another while at other times they have danced together and even encouraged one another. And, yet, the Holy Spirit has prevailed. It prevailed on a creation day long ago when it swept over the formless void and created the heavens and the earth. It prevailed one Pentecost long ago when the church was born. And, it prevails time and again when the people of God gather to worship God and then go into the world to love and to serve others. **(From the sermon on 5/23/99 by the Rev Dana Ferguson at the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. See www.fourthchurch.org)**

In a sermon entitled, Past, Present and Future, The Rev. Dana Ferguson told the story of Ann, a young mother whose husband was sent to prison for drug trafficking and she was left alone to raise their four young boys. Dana said, “Ann is one of those people you meet and immediately know you are in the presence of the Spirit. She exudes it. She’s vibrant and hospitable and gentle and courageous. When I heard her story, I asked Ann, ‘How did you do

it? How did you live through it all without becoming a bitter, tired, angry person?’ Ann’s response was simple, ‘The church,’ she said without any hesitation.” Dana commented, “You see her human spirit could get her through this life changing ordeal but it was the Holy Spirit that turned it all around for her. Ann’s human spirit didn’t battle the Holy Spirit; instead, it waited on it, believed in it, and relied on it to make life different - to make life beautiful in the midst of hardship; to make life harmonious in the midst of challenge; to make life rich in the midst of the unknown.

After listening to Ann for a while, Dana asked, “But what about your boys?” Again the answer was simple, “The church.” And Ann went on to share a story of exactly how the Holy Spirit nourished, challenged and directed the course of their lives. Ann said, “I remember one summer when I took the church’s youth group to deliver meals on wheels and my boys were then part of that group. The woman who normally took the route rode with us. When we arrived at Mr. Flores’ house, she told us that only one of us would need to get out. ‘He doesn’t speak English,’ she said, “only Spanish, and in the 3 years I’ve been delivering meals to him, he’s never spoken one word to me.’ She gave these instructions, ‘Just pass the meal to him through the bars of his wrought iron door.’ Well, that wouldn’t do for Ann. “Oh no,” Ann said, “it says

here that it's his birthday and we have this little cupcake we can give him." So, she herded the whole group to Mr. Flores's front door and they sang happy birthday when he opened the door. Then Stuart, Ann's son, passed the cupcake to Mr. Flores and the eyes of this 90 year-old man filled with tears. He began to speak to the group in English. But it wouldn't have mattered what language for the message of gratitude was clear. 'No one has remembered my birthday in years.' he exclaimed, 'not even my family.' Ann said, "This was truly a Pentecost moment. The power of the Holy Spirit transforming the gift of a song and a cupcake into the love of a community. That's how I raised my boys by always including them in the wonder of the church."

Dana Ferguson concluded by saying, "Ann truly believes in the power of the Holy Spirit - the power that not only changes life but revives life, shapes life and renews life. Ann believes it, Ann lives it and Pentecost happens in her life. When Ann tells her story, she reminds us that most often the blessings from the Holy Spirit are not measured in the material things that we are often tempted to count. Rather, she proclaims, the blessings of the Holy Spirit are in a life of faith that believes in Pentecost, that believes that the same Spirit that moved a little band of bedraggled disciples years ago still

lives and moves and calls. It is in that belief that we find many rich and intangible blessings which alter forever the course of our lives.

On this day may we thanks to the mysteriously loving and gracious God whose Holy Spirit continues to surprise us with new life and startle us with renewed faith. AMEN.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and Gracious God, we gather together on this beautiful Pentecost morning hoping to experience a sense of your presence in our midst that will help us to feel less fragmented and more comfortable with the spiritual part of us that connects us more fully to ourselves, to each other and to you. O God, in the midst of our problems, busyness, distractions, work, and relationships, remind us that you are the One who continues to seek us and offer us perspective, promise, healing and hope beyond the narrow view of reality that is familiar and known to us. In our attempts to find you and hear you and discern your will for our lives, we forget that it is you who are seeking after us. Help us to wait with hope and to remain open to your endless and insane possibilities that come to us in the ordinary events of our lives from friends and strangers who usually unknowingly act as your messengers of grace and promise and comfort.

As we open our fragile selves and fragmented lives to your love and purposes, remind us that it is probably more important to do acts of love and kindness toward others than it is to try and live a pure and holy life that is really not much good to anybody. We pray O God, for the courage to live lives of love and peace and generosity that reflect our gratitude to you for the gift of life we have been given and for the love and care and connections we experience in the ups and downs of life.

Please be with our friends and loved ones who are especially upset by illness, depression, grief, tragedy, or uncertainty. Give them a sense of peace and presence that will enable them to weather the storms in their lives and come out on the other side more whole. Gather us all more fully into your love and purposes that our lives may reflect the love that has claimed us and the spirit that continues to surprise and startle us with new life. Let us pray together...

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING

The word “Pentecost” literally means “fifty days” or the “fiftieth day.” In the Jewish faith Pentecost came exactly fifty days after Passover and was the festival that celebrated the completion of the harvest. Later on, this festival also celebrated the giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai, which was supposed to have taken place fifty days after the Exodus.

The last thing Jesus told his disciples to do before he ascended into heaven was to go back to Jerusalem and wait there for God’s promise to come true. According to Luke 24:49, the disciples “would be baptized by the Holy Spirit and clothed with power from on high.” So the disciples were hanging out in Jerusalem, waiting for the Lord’s promise to be fulfilled. The Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor says this about the disciples: “Before Pentecost, they were dense, timid bumblers who fled at the least sign of trouble. Afterwards, they were fearless leaders. They healed the sick and cast out demons. They went to jail gladly, where they sang hymns until the walls fell down.” How this transformation occurred is what the story of Pentecost is all about. Hear now the word of God!