

The Gift of the Spirit

A Sermon for Pentecost

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Pentecost Sunday—what a joyous day! Traditionally, it was the day set apart to celebrate the wheat harvest and God’s gift of the Ten Commandments at Sinai. Pentecost took on a new meaning after the resurrection. Now we view Pentecost as the day that commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles 50 days after the resurrection of Jesus at Easter and 10 days after his Ascension. Pentecost —the birthday of the Church!

According to the Book of Acts, the Church came into being on the day of Pentecost. As 120 worshipers, including the disciples, were fasting and praying in an upper room in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit descended upon them in a violent rushing wind that was heard throughout the city. Small fire-like “tongues” rested on their heads, and they began to speak in other languages. As crowds came to investigate the commotion, the Apostle Peter spoke to them about Jesus and exhorted them to repent. From the crowd of Jews and converts, 3,000 realized the truth of Peter’s words, were baptized, and became followers of Jesus.

As Christians celebrate one of the most exciting days in the Christian year, many look upon it as a time of renewal. The story of Pentecost in Acts causes people to pray for spiritual gifts, to renew their focus on evangelism, to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, and to enter into deeper intimacy with God and the Christian community. For Christians, the celebration of Pentecost imparts faith, hope, sharing of community, and awareness of a purpose much greater than themselves.

In John 14:8-27, John the Evangelist communicates the experience of the Spirit in a different way through sharing the words of Jesus’ “farewell discourse” to his disciples. John helps us think of the Spirit in ways other than the sheer excitement or emotional agitation we find in Acts:

⁸ Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” ⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. ¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. ¹² Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. ¹⁵ If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” (NRSV)

To understand the impact of this passage, we must first understand the importance of the message that Jesus is sharing with his disciples. In the beginning of chapter 14, Jesus tells his disciples he will be leaving them to go and prepare a place for them—and that they will know the way. Thomas, confused,

says that they neither know *where* Jesus is going nor do they know the way. Jesus replies, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” The late New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce wrote, “All truth is God’s truth, as all life is God’s life; but God’s truth and God’s life are incarnate in Jesus Christ.”

But the first disciples didn’t know the full story yet, and there was still confusion among them. So our passage begins with Philip’s saying, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Can you imagine the queasy stomach Jesus must have had when he heard that comment from one of his disciples after being with them for two years? I can just imagine Jesus shaking his head, running his hand through his hair, and saying, “Ah, come on Philip, how can you possibly not know who I am after all this time? Do you think I’ve been making all this stuff up? If you know me, then, you know the Father. The Father and I are one; he dwells in me and I in him. I do what I do and say what I say because I’m not speaking for myself, but for the Father. The works, the miracles that you have witnessed are his works. Come on man, BELIEVE!”

In seeing Jesus, Philip is seeing God! This is the highpoint of John’s Christology! According to New Testament scholar Gary Burge, “Jesus is not simply a religious teacher or guide, nor is he simply the means to some other destination. He is also the end, the goal. He is the One in whom God can be found. The exhaustive and exclusive nature of this astonishing claim cannot be missed.”¹ Only the Father can lead us to himself, and the Father is genuinely present in Jesus.

German theologian and New Testament professor Rudolf Bultmann said, “The implication behind the reproachful question [of Philip] is that all fellowship with Jesus loses its significance unless he is recognized as the one whose sole intention is to reveal God, and not to be anything for himself; but it also implies that the possibility of seeing God is inherent in the fellowship with Jesus. What need is there for anything further?”

What this means is that if we believe in Jesus and truly know Jesus, then we also know God. The fact is that God loved his creation so much that he desired above all else to be in relationship with us and came to dwell among us, incarnate in Jesus the Christ. This is the most awesome gift we will ever receive, and it’s ours for the taking—a relationship with God that comes from believing in his Son, the incarnate Jesus.

But this is not where the story ends. God’s developing relationship with the world and being revealed to us through the life of Jesus was only one of the reasons for the Incarnation. The other reason was the forgiveness of our sins through the death of Jesus on the cross. Pentecost was a scary time for the disciples—Jesus was telling them he was about to leave them, and they didn’t know what to do. The very thought of Jesus leaving them behind had the disciples gripped by fear.

Jesus knew they were frightened, and again he stressed that they must believe in him. He promised that his death would not interrupt the intimacy they enjoyed with him. They would be left behind to carry out the work of Jesus—and their works will be greater than the ones Jesus performed. That bears a little explanation. The works themselves will not be greater in terms of their being better, or more impressive. They will be greater in terms of their number—there will be more of them than those Jesus did in his three years of ministry on the earth. And the works the disciples will do by believing and

¹ Gary M. Burge, *John*, The NIV Application Commentary Book 4 (Zondervan, 2009).

praying in Jesus name will be the completed work of the Word made flesh and bring about the fullness of God's love. The works they do will really be Jesus' works, done to the glory of God.

Further, the disciples' prayers will be answered because their lives will be a continuation of Jesus' life in the world. Both deeds and answered prayer glorify the Father because it is Jesus who is at work and still accomplishing them. The idea that Jesus will answer prayers that are prayed in his name is, of course, predicated on the assumption that such prayers fit with the will and purposes of Christ in the world.

All these things can only be accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus. But his departure from them is also crucial, for only through it can the Holy Spirit become a reality for all who follow him. Again, it is John who tells us that Jesus makes four requests of his disciples: to believe, to pray in his name, to love him, and to keep his commandments. Out of the love Jesus has for them, he will ask the Father to send them another Counselor—the "Paraclete" (from a word meaning "called alongside"), the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Spirit is an outgrowth of the loving relationship between Jesus and his disciples, not an entitlement they earn. And the original Greek makes it clear that the Spirit will be poured out on the *community* of believers, who would become the Church. There is no indication that the Spirit was meant for individuals alone, because, from the beginning, Jesus called us into community.

Who is this Holy Spirit whom Jesus will ask the Father to send? The Spirit as Paraclete is God's powerful and nurturing presence, given to the disciples in the wake of Jesus' departure. The disciples will be able to keep Jesus' commandments through the Counselor, whose sustaining influence has no termination. The Holy Spirit will be for the faith community a helper, interpreter, witness, prosecutor, and revealer.

John enlightens us that the Counselor is the "Spirit of Truth," who teaches the truth of Jesus and enables the community to remember its link to Jesus. The "Spirit of Truth" will not be understood or seen by the world, but only by the community who believes in Jesus. Because of the teaching of the Spirit, the Church becomes a peculiar community, set apart, being indwelt by the Spirit. It is evident that the Church cannot take its cues for its life and mission from the surrounding culture.

The "Spirit of Truth" will constantly force the Church to take a reality check by prodding, needling, and cajoling the community to embrace its distinctiveness as the people of God. The Spirit will remind the Church that it has a meaningful present and a hopeful tomorrow in a future rich with promise.

In his discourse, Jesus emphasizes the conserving and teaching roles of the Spirit—he promises that the Spirit or Paraclete will recall the things he has done and said and will fix them in the minds of his followers. It is the gift of the Spirit that provides the meaning of Jesus' works. The Spirit does not bring new meaning, but instead gives correct applications and meanings for what Jesus did in history. Jesus' primary work was revealing the Father; the Spirit's primary work is revealing the Jesus of history to his followers.

Jesus moves the disciples beyond the present moment in which they are living into a future that is grounded in the certainty of his resurrection and the gift of the Spirit. He offers them a vision of the future shaped by the promises of God—a future in which God is always present to them through their love for one another and through the communal indwelling of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is intimately tied to Jesus; "to have Jesus in your heart" is to experience the Spirit's dwelling within. Father—Son—Spirit—we cannot have one without the other.

Jesus also assures the disciples that he will leave them with peace. The peace that the church seeks and receives is distinctive. It is the promise of divine presence, the assurance of people not orphaned or destitute. We will receive the gift of Jesus' *shalom*, a peace that brings an end to the brokenness of sin, but this *shalom* will be the fruit of the Spirit given when Jesus departs.

So, what does all this mean to us on Pentecost Sunday? What does it mean for us as members of the Body of Christ, the Church? How do we reflect the love of Christ in our lives? Can the world look at us and know that the Spirit indwells us by the way we live our lives?

All too often we are caught up in the culture around us. We are timid about proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Jesus himself told us, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Do you think Jesus got it wrong? Was he perhaps not paying attention when God explained his role in the Incarnation? I think Jesus knows exactly who he is, and our fear of proclaiming his identity means that we are not letting the Spirit act upon or in our lives.

The Spirit leads us to the truth of Jesus. The Spirit reminds us of all that Jesus taught us. Yet all too often it feels as though we aren't really paying attention. When following our faith is too easy, we don't take it seriously. If we never have to stand up for the right to worship Jesus, if we never have to fight for what we believe in, we become complacent and lazy in our faith. We don't understand what it means to be a community of believers. Relying on our personal experience of God, we each go our own way. We have individual faith that suits our needs. When that happens, we've lost the truth of the gospel message.

God called us into community to live and learn and love through the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ and the mystery of the Holy Spirit. That love should be evident in our worship. A community of faith that is being led and guided by the Spirit should be vibrant and alive. But all too often worship services feel dead. The Spirit doesn't seem to be moving. Should we blame it on the pastor, or maybe the person next to us who is singing off key? Whom can we blame?

Why can't we feel the movement of the Holy Spirit? Maybe, while the Spirit is busy working to get our attention, we are busy looking at the clock, worrying that we might be home late for the game we want to watch on TV, hoping we can get out of church quickly enough to beat the crowd to the breakfast buffet, thinking about what we'll do this afternoon. And for this Jesus hung on a cross and died? We are far too often an ungrateful bunch.

What we desperately need is to let the Spirit come alive *in us*! We need a Pentecostal moment! We need to embrace the love God has poured down on us and share it with our brothers and sisters in Christ. If something Pentecostal isn't happening in the church, we aren't acknowledging and accepting the new and marvelous ways God wants us to go and grow with him.

A dear friend of mine who served as a PC(USA) missionary in Malawi shared with me what was going on in her church and in that nation. She was excited about how the Spirit was moving among a group of Malawians who love Jesus. In a letter, she wrote:

The *Book of Worship* of the Presbyterian Church offers liturgy for a number of different worship experiences. In the US, these are usually done individually or possibly combining a few, like baptism, confirmation and communion in one service. When that happens, the congregation is usually "warned" ahead of time that the service may be longer than an hour. That is not the case in Malawi. The Sunday after Christmas,

worship at Chigodi included everything in the *Book of Worship* except a funeral. We had 25 infant baptisms, 44 adult baptisms, reception of the confirmation class (all 44 of them), ordination of elders and deacons, the blessing of 19 marriages and communion. In addition, we had 6 choirs sing, welcomed visitors and had a full sermon. The service was 4 hours long and no one left early or complained about the time. They felt that they had “gotten their money’s worth” for a single Sunday offering. They felt this was the right way to end the old year and prepare for the new.

These people have the love of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—at the forefront of all they do. They don’t care if the worship takes all day or if they have to walk miles to get to the church. All they care about is worshiping the one true living God. When we look back to that first Pentecost, we find the faithful were waiting and ready. They were waiting for the Holy Spirit. And they were ready to be Spirit-led. The Holy Spirit winds of change came, and the Church was born.

When the great evangelist Gypsy Smith was asked to name the greatest need of today’s church, he answered, “Another Pentecost!” When asked the second greatest need, he answered, “Another Pentecost!” When asked the third greatest need, he answered, “Another Pentecost!” And as we look around at today’s church and see the power shortage, we know we need another Pentecost. We need something Pentecostal to happen to the church. It is happening. It is happening to churches all around the world. Will you make this a time of renewal as part of the community of faith by once again welcoming the Holy Spirit to indwell your heart? The Spirit is blowing a mighty wind, and we too can be swept up by it. All we have to do is open the door. Alleluia and Amen.