**The Church in the Power of the Spirit**

**Text: Acts 2:1-6**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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On Pentecost Day, the Holy Spirit filled the apostles with power from on high.

Okay, right there we’ve got a problem, because we Disciples don’t talk a lot about the Holy Spirit. Which is rather odd, considering that our founding event was the 1801 revival at Cane Ridge, where the Holy Spirit was very much evident. But early on we turned away from the Spirit-filled ministry of Barton W. Stone and followed Alexander Campbell’s more cerebral approach to the faith.

This de-emphasis of the Spirit is reflected in our hymnal. There aren’t a whole lot of Holy Spirit hymns there, and many of the ones that are there aren’t very familiar.

And yet…we *act* like a church that takes the Spirit *very* seriously. We’ve always been known for our warm fellowship. Is that not the Holy Spirit binding us together? We shy away from rigid doctrine and instead focus on the practical. Is that not the Holy Spirit working in our midst? Above all else, we are a people of the Table, where all are welcome. Is that not the Holy Spirit, drawing us in, just as we are?

That’s what the Holy Spirit does: it shows no partiality; it draws us all in; it binds together all manner of persons and races and nations, making all one in Christ Jesus.

The Holy Spirit has been doing this from the earliest days of the Church. The Acts of the Apostles – which some have called the Acts of the Holy Spirit, because the Spirit drives the action throughout this book – the Acts of the Apostles tells stories of the Spirit falling upon one group after another: some of those groups being very diverse, and all of the groups together forming a very pluralistic Jesus Movement.

It all began on Pentecost Day. Jews from many nations were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate a Jewish harvest festival. It was called Pentecost because it came 50 days after Passover. Pentecost: from the Greek word for 50. On Pentecost Day they celebrated the first fruits of the wheat harvest. The scripture says, “There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem (Act 2:5).” And the Holy Spirit was poured out on the whole bunch of them!

It was the birthday of the Church!! The Church began as a Jewish-Christian movement, ingathered and inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit. But note how even at the beginning it was a very diverse group of Jewish-Christians: from *every* nation. This was the first Pentecost, when the Jews received the Holy Spirit.

This first Pentecost gets the best press, but it was not the only great outpouring of the Spirit. There were two other Spirit-filled blessings; two other “Pentecosts,” if you will. Let me tell you about them:

These first Jewish-Christians knew that they were called to preach the Word and gather new converts. Jesus had commissioned them to do that very thing. And no doubt they thought, “All are welcome…as long as you look and act just like us.” But nooooo. The Holy Spirit had other ideas. The next group that the Spirit descended upon was the Samaritans. Wait, what? The Samaritans!? Those heretics whom the Jews despised!? They’re going to join the Church too!? That must have been the reaction of a lot of Jewish-Christians when word came that “Samaria had accepted God’s Word” (Acts 8:14). They were so amazed that they sent Peter and John to check it out. We read in Acts 8 that Peter and John prayed with the new converts and the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit! Call it the second Pentecost.

So, first it was the Jewish-Christians who received the blessing of the Spirit, and then the Samaritan-Christians. But the Holy Spirit wasn’t done yet. Peter had a vision, which he understood to mean that he was called to preach to the Gentiles. The Gentiles!? You can almost hear the outcry of protest from the Mother Church in Jerusalem. The Samaritans, at least, embraced *some* of the Hebrew scriptures. But who would have thought that these Greek pagans would be the object of God’s affection as well? But so it was. Inspired by his vision, Peter preached a sermon to a group of Gentiles. “While Peter was…speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on everyone who heard the word.” That’s what we’re told in the 10th chapter of Acts. That whole bunch of Gentiles received the Holy Spirit as well; the third Pentecost!

So there was not one Pentecost, but three: one for the Jews, one for the Samaritans, and one for the Gentiles. Three Pentecosts, but only one Spirit, one Body, one Church; because all three groups were drawn together into this very diverse, very pluralistic, very multi-faceted Jesus Movement.

The Spirit was poured out upon all of them because, you see, God shows no partiality. That’s what Peter said at the start of his sermon to the Gentiles. And because God shows no partiality – because God doesn’t operate according to our preconceived notions of who’s acceptable and who isn’t, who’s deserving and who isn’t – you never know where the Holy Spirit is going to land. That’s our first point. Scripture says, “God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another…*Whoever* worships him and does what is right is *acceptable* to him” (Acts 10:35).

The Spirit is likely to descend upon *whoever* worships God. It’s the Spirit’s call, not ours. In our sinful human pride we’re tempted to build fences and try to keep people out – people whom we deem to be not like us; people whom we redeem to be “the other” – but the Spirit casts a wide net and calls all sorts of people, draws in all sorts of people, empowers all sorts of people!

That’s what happened in the 1970’s, when out of the blue, all sorts of women decided to go to seminary. Ordained women were few and far between in those days. There were so rare that in 1974, when the Episcopal Church ordained 11 women, it was something of a church-wide scandal! But even in the midst of that controversy, wave after wave of women where showing-up on seminary campuses. It was an outpouring of the Holy Spirit! A modern day Pentecost!! How else do we account for so many women, with so few role models, all of a sudden going where almost none had dared to go before, going where they sometimes weren’t wanted, going without any assurance that they would ever be ordained. The student body at Andover Newton Theological School was already 50% women when I arrived in 1976. Vanderbilt Divinity School, where Pastor Helen went, had a similar percentage by the time she graduated in 1982. It was the Holy Spirit that called them, and the Holy Spirit that empowered them to stand firm in the face of considerable opposition. It was a modern-day Pentecost: the first fruits of a new outpouring of the Spirit. Because God shows no partiality. The Spirit is offered to *everyone*.

That’s the first thing that emerges from these Pentecost stories. And the second thing is this: the Spirit has an amazing way of bringing together the right resources and the right gifts at the right time. In Acts 2, just when the gift of tongues was needed to speak to all those folks in Jerusalem, from all those language groups, the Spirit gave that gift to the apostles. In Acts 10, just when the Gentiles were ready to hear the Gospel, the Spirit gave Peter the vision that convinced him that he needed to preach to them.

And today, just as we’re launching Our Future Story, resources have become available through the Disciples’ Indiana Region to help us launch our work. I alluded to this last week, but it gets even better. Listen to this: As you know, we are launching Our Future Story on two fronts: the revitalization of Camp Bedford, and the development of a new Faith Formation program. Last week I announced that we will be receiving grants this year to kick-start our work on both fronts. As I said then, just when we’re poised to launch these two initiatives, funds have become available for exactly the ministries that we’re launching. That’s the work of the Holy Spirit.

And here’s how it gets better: It was confirmed this past Wednesday that funding on both the Camp and Faith Formation fronts will be available each year for many years to come. We’ll have to apply to the Indiana Region for the Faith Formation grants, but the Camp grant will arrive every October; a minimum of $25,000 each year from the Christian Church in Indiana.

And…shortly after we committed ourselves to a particular Faith Formation program called Children Worship and Wonder…low and behold, a training event for Children Worship and Wonder volunteers was announced for this coming August. Perfect timing!

But, of course, the timing of the Holy Spirit is *always* perfect. And when the Spirit calls the Church to a particular ministry, the Spirit gives the gifts to make that ministry happen. As scripture says, “When your young see visions, and your elders dream dreams, I will pour out my Spirit” (Acts 2:17-18). Or, to put that same idea into our present context, “Once you’ve crafted your Future Story, I will pour out my Spirit.” That’s just the way that the Spirit works! 2,000 years ago in Jerusalem and today in Bedford: that’s the way the Spirit works. It’s a whole new Pentecost, right here in our midst.

Which is why…we don’t need to be afraid. We may not be able to do *everything* that we’d like to do, but the Spirit will provide the resources to do what we’re *called* to do. We can trust that. In Acts 16, on his second missionary journey, Paul wanted to go into Asia and start new churches. But he wasn’t able to do so. The Spirit blocked him from going where *he* wanted to go, and instead opened a way for him to go where the *Spirit* wanted him to go. Good things are going to happen here; but according to *God’s* will, not necessarily ours.

The Spirit is at work in us and through us and all around us. And seeing the Spirit at work is one of the things that helps to keep my faith strong. As you know, I’m something of an empiricist. I need to see the evidence. And when the gifts that we need appear at just the right time, that’s evidence of the Spirit at work. When the people that we need appear at just the right time, that’s evidence of the Spirit at work. When the encouragement that we need appears at just the right time, that’s evidence of the Spirit at work. So I’m not worried about the future. I’m not afraid that we’ll fail. The Spirit is poured out wherever God’s people are poised on the front lines of God’s Kingdom. And *everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved! Amen!!