

Acts 2:1-21

THE PROMISE FULFILLED

A Presbyterian minister was teaching a confirmation class to a small group of girls. He said, "In one session, I was instructing them about the seasons of the Christian year, and I asked them if they knew what Pentecost was. Since they didn't know, I proceeded to tell them that Pentecost was when the church was gathered and the Holy Spirit landed on them like tongues of fire on their heads. Then they spoke the gospel in all the languages of the world." Two of the girls took this information in stride, but the third looked astonished, her eyes wide. I looked back at her, and finally she said, "Gosh, Reverend Long, we must have been absent that Sunday." The minister said afterwards, "The beauty of that moment was not that she misunderstood about Pentecost, but that she understood about the church. In her mind, there was the possibility that the event of Pentecost could have happened, even in our Sunday service." (Thomas G. Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes*, p. 15)

Today is Pentecost Sunday in the life of the church. In the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, we read that somehow God's Spirit was unleashed on those 120 disciples of Jesus gathered together, and the church was created, brought into being. We may never fully understand the strange occurrences that took place that day, when timid and fearful disciples became bold and empowered witnesses of the gospel, but this we do understand: the promise of God was fulfilled.

The prophet Joel had proclaimed centuries earlier God's promise that "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams... then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Then, just prior to his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion, Jesus tried to prepare his disciples for that time when he would no longer be with them by saying, promising: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth." And, just before the resurrected Christ ascended and returned to heavenly glory, Jesus promised his disciples "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Acts 2 states emphatically that God has kept God's promise!

Fifty days after Passover, a multitude of the Jewish people from all over the known world had gathered once again in Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of Pentecost. They came from every direction and every country to return to their spiritual home and bring the first fruits of the wheat harvest to the temple. Pentecost was also associated with God's gift of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai, which, for the Jews meant the birth of Judaism, and the occasion evoked from them an obedient response by renewing their covenant with Yahweh. Now, with God's promised gift of the Holy Spirit being realized, for Christians, Pentecost meant the birthday of the church. The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Trinity. There is no way we can list all that the Spirit does for us but here are a few examples. In the Bible, the Spirit of God was present and involved in the creation. The Spirit gave inspiration to the judges, kings, prophets, and apostles to listen for and record God's Word. The Spirit glorifies and praises Christ Jesus, and leads us deeper into the divine truth. The Spirit helps us to remember, understand, and act upon Jesus' teachings. The Spirit is our Counselor and Comforter. No one can say, "Jesus is Lord," without the help of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit assures us that we are God's beloved children, heirs with Christ. The Spirit of God helps us to grow in godliness. God's Spirit equips the saints with every good and

necessary gift in order for us to serve both Christ and our neighbor. There are the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The Holy Spirit empowers us to work for God's will to be done on earth. The Spirit of the living God inspires and breathes new life into us.

There is so much more to be said about God's presence and love revealed in and through the Holy Spirit. But there is certainly one more thing to say: the Holy Spirit brings people of diverse backgrounds together into one community of faith. Pentecost is the great reversal of the Tower of Babel account (found in Genesis 11) where God confused the language of the people and scattered them so they could no longer work together to compete with God. Now, with Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is on the move; divisions are healed, people begin to hear one another, and they are joined together in a new family of faith centered around the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Along with many of those Jews from around the known world, eventually the Gentiles were included, and today five more of our youth are added to that countless and growing number. People from many different countries and backgrounds are made one in Christ. There is unity amidst the diversity. And, as Christians work together to serve God in Christ, the numbers grow and the fellowship is strengthened.

Donald Booz, a District Executive with the Church of the Brethren, was visiting a nearby church and he overheard people talking about Pentecost. The church was once a thriving congregation with lots of programs for every age group. They were listed in the top ten percent of growing churches in their denomination. Over the years, they built an enormous building. Financial giving and tithing to the church were beyond the national standards and, in no time, the building was paid off. But then the makeup of the community started to change. People started to move out to the suburbs and farther away from the church. It didn't take long for the membership to decrease along with the financial giving to the church. The congregation could no longer afford two pastors and they were struggling to keep one full time pastor on staff.

Over a period of years, the church began to deteriorate. Less and less young people were attending church. Bills were not getting paid and, before too long, their pastor moved on. The bishop had a hard time placing someone in the pulpit. However, the will to survive was strong among those who remained and after much thought and prayer, the members decided to open their doors to all those in the neighborhood. They started a latch key program that provided a safe place for children after school. They invited Alcoholics Anonymous along with Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts to use their facilities. They operated a soup kitchen for the homeless. And throughout the week, they offered free baby-sitting for single mothers. In other words, they changed – with the help of the Holy Spirit - for the better. (Biblical Preaching Journal, Spring 2001, p. 29) That is one more story about Pentecost and the power of God's Spirit to change people's lives and bring them together into a community of faith focused on serving the risen Lord Jesus. On that first Pentecost, people heard, in their own languages, the disciples of Jesus speaking about God's deeds of power. The same Spirit of God is on the move in our midst. Can we hear what the Spirit is saying? Will we go where God is sending us? Will we fulfill our membership promises? The community cookout next month is one more opportunity for us, with the Spirit's help, to "share God's love, embrace our neighbor, and nurture each other. Let us reach out to our neighbors, include them, and seek to be in real community with them in the name of Jesus Christ.

In the opening story, the young girl understood that the miracle of Pentecost was a distinct possibility, an event that could have very well happened right there in her own church's

worship service. Do we believe the same? Let those who have ears, hear; and, together, let us listen for God's Spirit to stir within us and move us out into the world – there to serve our Lord and neighbor as best we can and to build up the community of faith within Christ's body – to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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