

Joel 2:28,29

For the last twenty years, I have preached on Pentecost Sunday from Acts 2. Of course, this makes perfect sense because it IS the story of how the Holy Spirit was given to us after Jesus' Ascension. Throughout the Old Testament, we read about God's Spirit coming down on one or more of God's people and "resting on them". Yet once the work of the Spirit is done, it returns. But before Jesus' crucifixion, he told his disciples that he would not leave them orphaned. That he would send an Advocate to come be with them in his place.

Before Jesus' final ascension, he told his disciples to go to Jerusalem and wait to see what would happen next. And it was in this waiting that God sent the wind and the flames of the Holy Spirit that descended on God's people and stayed. And that same Spirit remains with us today and is what we celebrate on Pentecost Sunday.

But I was a little bored with the story of the disciples speaking in languages that they had never heard in order to spread the news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Even the flames of the Spirit landing on the heads of those there and turning them into human candles did not excite me, so I just kept on reading.

In his book called "The Acts of the Apostles," Luke shows us how the Holy Spirit literally founded and grew the church. This is why Pentecost is also referred to as the "Birthday of the Church". And as I kept reading, the Holy Spirit finally lit MY heart on fire, and I started making connections that I had never really paid attention to.

Many of you remember that Peter, one of Jesus closest friends, was also the one who denied knowing him not once, but three times in the hours leading up to his crucifixion. Yet, according to the Gospel of John, one of the first things Jesus did when he came back to earth was

to give Peter three chances to repent. And he did. Three times Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me?” and when he answered, “Yes, Lord, you know I do”, Jesus gave him a specific way to show his love.

Well, when we take the time to read PAST the second chapter of Acts, we will see how the Holy Spirit gave Peter three more chances to demonstrate his devotion. Now, let’s remember that Peter is an uneducated Galilean fisherman. And he was known to have the gift of having to take one foot out of his mouth before he could insert the other one. Yet, the Holy Spirit gives Peter three chances to demonstrate that God the Father, Jesus the Savior and the Advocate, the Holy Spirit will empower us to do things we never dreamed of. As Joel had predicted, Peter was enabled to speak eloquently in order to share the news of salvation.

The first thing the Spirit did was empower Peter to stand before those attending the first Pentecost event and defend the disciples. You see, when they began to speak in foreign tongues, in order that ALL the world might hear the Good News, some of Jesus’ opponents accused them of being drunk. Peter then gave a convincing speech that recounted the whole ministry of Jesus and many believed. But that was not the end of the power that the Spirit gave Peter.

In the next chapter, Peter and John were empowered to heal a beggar who had been lame from birth. Then Peter eloquently gave another persuasive sermon when those who witnessed the healing questioned all of these powers. And the Bible tells us that the church grew from just a handful of believers to over 5000 people in a few short weeks!

Because of the political climate of the time, the opposition to Jesus from his own people and the threat that this power made to the Roman leaders, these wonderful displays of God’s work landed Peter and John in jail. You would think that the story of healing someone who was crippled from birth would be one of those “feel good” stories that they share at the end of a news

broadcast. But instead, the powers that be are still trying to discredit Jesus and any of his followers. So hear again the word of God from Acts 4:5-12. This lets us know what happens next and serves as our text for the remainder of the morning. READ ACTS 4:5-12

It is *in this passage* that Jesus fulfills his promise and Peter becomes the rock on which the church is built. Three times he is allowed to repent. Three times he is given the power to testify. Peter uses Scripture from three different sources – the Prophet Joel, the Torah and now the Psalms. And what we learn from seeing the Spirit at work in Peter’s life is that no matter how much opposition we face in our own life, the Holy Spirit empowers us. And friends, that same Spirit is with us today, empowering us to do things we could never do for ourselves. By the power of the Spirit, we are enabled to have the courage to speak the truth in love, to heal, and to continue to grow the church.

The story of Peter is a source of encouragement to us today because it reminds us that the Holy Spirit empowers truth-telling, even when it is not popular or when it challenges other peoples’ thinking. So much of our reporting and even our feelings about the COVID crisis have been distorted to align themselves with our politics. While I am also guilty of this, I know it truly is not helpful. We need facts and science now, not feelings and opinions.

The politics of the day would have made it easy for Peter and John to answer in a way that pleased the Roman leaders or gave credit to the religious authorities. But when asked, “By what power or by what name did you do this?” the Holy Spirit enables Peter to tell the truth. “Let it be known to all who stand here that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.”

That same Spirit is available to us today. But friends, we have to LISTEN to the Spirit and then be brave enough to obey in order to truly be disciples for Jesus. This means that we

must speak out about injustice, turn away from violence and seek peace. Did you know that according to an early 1968 Harris Poll, Martin Luther King, Jr. died with a public disapproval rating of nearly 75 percent? While today he is considered a hero, in his day, truth-telling got him killed. This is because people do not like to hear the truth if it does not align with their definition of what is right. Truth-telling is what got Jesus Christ killed and will no doubt kill many others. Yet, the Holy Spirit empowered Peter to speak the truth, no matter the cost. And Peter obeyed.

In view of the events in Minneapolis with regard to the tragic death of George Floyd at the hands of three policemen, I wonder what would have happened if one middle aged white person had come to his defense. Of course, this would have seemed radical! But the church was founded on radical truths. Peter preached the resurrection of the dead to a group of Sadducees who did not believe in resurrection at all. I wonder if Peter came to our churches today and preached a radical message that challenged us so personally if we would allow him to stay? On this Pentecost Sunday, perhaps we should remember that in order for the Holy Spirit to continue to blow winds of change into our world, we must listen and obey.

The Holy Spirit also empowered Peter and John to heal the man born lame. Now some of us have truly been given the gift of healing. We all have been extremely grateful for the many health care professionals who have cared for COVID patients over the last months, some even giving their own lives. In fact, I am sure that we are ALWAYS grateful for those who help us when we are sick. But not all of us are called to be doctors or nurses. My roommate at Clemson was a nursing major and if I had to study all that science, I would still be there, trying to graduate!

But we are empowered today to heal in other ways if we let the Holy Spirit have free reign in our lives. Before ordination, Presbyterians are required to complete 400 hours serving

as a chaplain in a hospital. I was assigned to a state psychiatric hospital in Anderson, SC. My supervisor was a male minister and my peer group consisted of 5 other males, two of whom were already experienced pastors.

One afternoon, after I had only been there about three weeks, we got a call that a patient in the Women's "Pod" as it was called, wanted the lady preacher. While we knew what that meant, the whole group of chaplains followed me. As we neared the locked door, I could hear what sounded like animal howling. As we came in, I first noticed that all the nurses had locked themselves into the office, closed off with glass. The other patients stood or sat watching this one woman cry loudly and dramatically. Even the other chaplains seemed afraid

But I immediately went to her, took her hand, and began to talk calmly and quietly. The only thing that I could understand in her wailing was the words "my children" and the mother in me connected deeply to the mother in her. I continued to speak, to rub her hands, and she began to get softer and calmer. My colleagues were literally frozen in place. Her wails turned to sobs, then cries and then those small hiccupping sounds that babies make at the end of a crying fit. Finally, I found myself saying, "Would you like to pray with me?" and every head in the room bowed. We prayed, I hugged her and left.

As soon as we made it safely into the hall, one of the men with me said, "HOW did you know what to SAY to her?" I will never forget my answer, as long as I live. I said truthfully, "I have no idea what I just said." What I meant is that the Holy Spirit completely took over me. The Holy Spirit gave me words that I did not have and tools that I had never used and a calm that I may never feel again! And that is how we can ALL be healers.

When the Holy Spirit is given free reign in our lives, you and I can be empowered to lead someone out of ignorance, which is the greatest source of fear. You and I can encourage the

teacher who feels like throwing in the towel by taking time to say “thank you” for Zooming with my child. You and I can show compassion by sharing the gift of our presence or by helping someone find forgiveness. We can listen without offering solutions. We can share the ways God has worked in our own lives. And all of these are ways that the Holy Spirit heals.

But perhaps the most miraculous thing about this story is the way that we see the Holy Spirit growing the church. And that has been the greatest gift of the COVID 19 pandemic. We all know that God uses tragic circumstances to bring about good. That is the story of the crucifixion in one sentence. But the inability to “do church” the way that we are accustomed to has been bringing people back to the Word of God in droves.

Now most of us would rather look you in the eye when we preach instead of pretending to be You Tube stars. But we are being forced to realize that people are listening to the Word that have been unable or unwilling to attend church in years because they can do so in their own homes. And while this is not MY preferred tool for evangelism, it is working. And truthfully, evangelism should not be about numbers, but about sharing the Good News!

This story in Acts is a reminder that Peter drew people to church by following the example of Jesus, not a particular doctrine or set of instructions or doing things the way they always been done. When Peter stands before the religious authorities, he not only challenges their reading of their own Scriptures but he implies that the Holy Spirit is no respecter of theological doctrine. Which is what Jesus Christ preached throughout his ministry. Because when given the choice between legalism and love, Jesus chose love every time. And so must we.

Only a wise and wonderful God, who loves us enough to send his Son to die for each one listening now could empower an uneducated fisherman to preach with such conviction and influence. And that same God can turn a world crisis into a tool for salvation. So let’s all pray

that the Holy Spirit will draw people so closely to the word that, when given the chance to return to church, those others will come too.

After seeing more clearly how the Holy Spirit worked through Peter, I guess what Pentecost boils down to is trust. Do you trust the power of the Holy Spirit to do with your life what it will, to call you where you might not want to go, to speak the truth to those who may not want to hear it? Because if you do, then the Holy Spirit will continue to amaze us. May we feel the wind blowing and may the flames ignite us to sustain the truth and to help others find healing. And may the church, the body of Christ on earth, continue to grow and share the Good News in ways we have never imagined. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

Pentecost Sunday, 202, Nazareth Presbyterian Church

The prayer that comes to me this morning from the Holy Spirit is the prayer of the Psalmist, "How long oh Lord?" How long must we fear the germs that keep us from sharing life, enjoying your world more fully? How long will the need for a cure keep us from work and play and life as we know it? How long will we miss our friends? How long must we keep from hugging and how long must we ache for the need of human touch?

How long, oh Lord, must a man live in fear because of the color of his skin? How long must a woman hide her religious beliefs for fear of condemnation? How long must we watch as people choose violence as a way of seeking fairness? How long will the powerful misuse their privilege at the expense of others.

God of love, of healing, of wholeness. We pray for your justice to roll down like waters and your righteousness like an ever-rolling stream. May the winds of the Spirit blow change into our lives that help us all look for a better way. May the Spirit ignite our hearts to seek ways that choose love over hate, peace over war, positive attitudes instead of dwelling on the wrong. Come Lord, Jesus, Come. Amen.

Prayer of confession: Gracious God, you asked for my hands that you could use them for your purposes. I gave them for a moment and then withdrew, for the work was hard. You asked for my mouth to speak out against injustice. I gave you a whisper that I might not be accused. You asked for my eyes to see the pain of poverty. I closed them for I did not want to know. You asked for my life that you might work through me. I gave you a fractional part that I might not get involved. God, forgive me for serving you only when it is convenient to do so, only in places where it is safe to do so, only with people who make it easy to do so. Please forgive me, renew me, and send me out as a usable instrument that I may take seriously, the meaning of your cross. Amen.

