

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ  
Pentecost Sunday & the Sacrament of Holy Communion- May 23, 2010

Scripture lessons: Psalm 103:1-5 & Acts 2:1-21

## THE TRIUMPH OF THE SPIRIT

On this Pentecost Sunday, we especially celebrate the triumph of the Holy Spirit. Over all of our differences of language, nationality, race, class, and gender, over all such things that often can seem like insurmountable barriers, the Holy Spirit prevails.

We see this dramatically in Acts, chapter 2. There we were, gathered in Jerusalem from all over the globe, people of so many diverse languages and nationalities. At the Holy Spirit's descent our differences were transcended. The Holy Spirit brought us together.

Sometimes we talk about the "human spirit". A person overcomes significant setbacks to achieve a worthy goal and we speak of the human spirit being "indomitable". A runner in an Olympic race, let's say, falls or is knocked down, but gets up to finish or even win the race. Commentators note what "great spirit" they have. They're lifted up as examples of the power and resiliency of our species.

In 1950 when William Faulkner received the Nobel Prize for literature, he sang his praise of the human spirit. He said, "I believe that human beings will not only endure, but prevail. (We are) immortal . . . because we have a soul, a spirit (that is) capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."

True enough, but we don't always put those capacities to good use. Our spirit can instead become an enemy of God. The same spirit that in times of great difficulty can take a deep breath, steel itself, and move forward with remarkable acts of compassion, sacrifice, and endurance is also the spirit that can clench its fists, lash out in defiant and rebellious rage against God, and plunge headlong into terrible destruction. The human spirit can be a source of both wondrous achievement and awful sin.

Aware of this profound fact, preacher Lisa Fishbeck suggests that the best way to understand our history is to see it as a long story both of the conflicts and the cooperation we've had with the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit and our spirit sometimes are at odds. Sometimes we dance beautifully together. Sometimes we're in direct opposition and sometimes we sing in sweet harmony.

The Pentecost story can help us to see more of this. Originally, Pentecost was a Jewish harvest festival. The usual time for celebrating it came not long after Jesus' resurrection. As Acts, chapter 2, begins the disciples have seen Jesus risen from the dead, but now he's also ascended into heaven so they wonder what will happen next.

Jesus has told them to wait in Jerusalem until he sends his Spirit to them. They wait, they wonder, they doubt, and they fear, but on Pentecost, a mighty wind rushes through. Tongues of fire dance on their heads as the Holy Spirit comes. The disciples, who had been uncertain and disheartened, move boldly now into the streets of Jerusalem to declare the good news. The Holy Spirit gives them power far beyond their own.

They preach the gospel and the church is born. Who will be in it? Only Jews, of course, since Jews, even though they're gathered from all over the world, are the only ones in Jerusalem for the Pentecost festival. From the start, therefore, the disciples assume the good news of Jesus will be good news for the people of Israel alone.

Yet the Holy Spirit keeps on moving. Recall the story from Acts, chapter 10 that was our second Scripture reading a few weeks ago. It told us that shortly after Pentecost Peter has a dream. He sees a sheet lowered from heaven with all sorts of animals in it, including some that are not kosher. A voice from heaven tells him to kill and eat, but Peter refuses. As an observant Jew, he will not eat any animal that is unclean. The voice replies, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

Peter realizes his vision isn't about unclean food, but about people that he has considered unclean. Soon he meets a Gentile named Cornelius, a Roman soldier who hears the gospel, believes, and is baptized. The church might have become a small sect within Judaism, but the Holy Spirit says no to that.

Instead, the Spirit comes to outsider Gentiles, even to people like us. The Holy Spirit triumphs over our false boundaries.

Fifteen hundred years later, however, the church born at Pentecost is in big trouble. It has become corrupt. It drips with wealth and complacency. Will the movement that began so miraculously at Pentecost rot out and die?

Not as long as the Holy Spirit is moving. From Rotterdam, Desiderius Erasmus writes his sharp, satirical, and truthful criticisms of the church. In Germany, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther rises up to call the church back to its biblical roots. Deep and desperately needed reforms follow as the Holy Spirit again prevails.

In the eighteenth-century, England is in trauma. Hordes of people are moving from the countryside to the city as the first industrial revolution is underway. Alcoholism is a scourge across the land and poverty degrades the lives of most. The church keeps its distance from these sufferings, and to most people it appears remote, cold, and privileged.

But one day a Church of England priest named John Wesley feels his heart “strangely warmed”. It’s the heat of the Holy Spirit and loosened by it, Wesley starts an amazing revival that sweeps through England and transforms millions of lives. Moved by the Spirit, many of those under Wesley’s leadership (they come to be known as Methodists) let go of the bottle and commit to new lives of Christian love and service. The Holy Spirit triumphs as the church in England is renewed.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, the United States isn’t that much different from 18<sup>th</sup>-century England. Our cities swell with newly arrived immigrants who jam pack into large and wretched tenements. Their poverty is woeful and the threat of despair looms over them constantly.

But the Holy Spirit leads a young man named Frank Mason North into one of New York City’s worst areas. He works among the poor in Hell’s Kitchen and devises new structures to lift them up and give them hope. As part of his ministry he also writes hymns, including one of the greats that we sang just last week. Its first verse says: “Where cross the crowded ways of life, where sound the cries of clan and race, above the noise of selfish strife, O Christ, we hear your voice of grace”. Frank Mason North leads many of our city churches to hear and heed that voice as they reach out in new ways to the poor. The Holy Spirit comes again.

Later on, the early 1960s are a bad time for the civil rights movement in our country. Those who struggle for the equal rights of black people continue to be hounded, beaten, and killed. A major march on Washington is organized in the hope of giving new life to the movement, of pouring fresh energy into the pursuit of its righteous cause. How should that be done?

Martin Luther King, Jr. does it by proclaiming “I Have a Dream”. On the first Pentecost Peter said that in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, our young would see visions and our old would dream dreams. Dr. King envisions and dreams a world where all people will live together as God’s equally precious and beloved children. This dream keeps the civil rights movement going through many dark and difficult times. It’s a dream of the Holy Spirit and through it the Spirit rushes in again.

In the New Testament church, women were often key leaders. Before long, however, they get pushed aside as the church adopts older patterns and mores from surrounding cultures. Occasionally, there’s a grand exception like Catherine Booth in the Salvation Army, but over the course of church history the gifts of women for leadership in ministry are mostly ignored or outright repudiated. This is true even more so for people who are homosexual. They’re rejected not only for positions of leadership, but frequently from the church as a whole.

Yet later in the 20th century the body of Christ awakens to new directions. The gifts both of women and of gay people begin to be affirmed. Our mainline Protestant churches in general begin regularly to ordain women and our United Church of Christ in particular welcomes lesbian and gay sisters and brothers into our congregations and clergy. Some people say that it’s merely a sign that the church is finally catching up with the times. A more biblical way to say it is, “God is still speaking for the Holy Spirit has come.”

Here’s how Roman Catholic theologian Walter Kasper puts this matter between us and the Holy Spirit:

“Everywhere that life breaks forth and comes into being, everywhere that new life, as it were, seethes and bubbles, everywhere that hope is born even where life is violently devastated, throttled, gagged and slain- wherever true life rises, there the Spirit of God is at work.”

The Spirit moves and triumphs, leaping over our false boundaries, calling us forward, and bringing us together. Whether in our wider histories and societies or in the church global or local, when we’re divided, cold of heart, slow to act, or timid and cowering, the Holy Spirit moves us again. The same is true in our personal lives.

The Spirit can come to us with a soft but insistent voice to remind us that though our life may have gone awry, fresh opportunities to start over are always there. The Spirit can work in us, awakening our desire to keep striving towards the good, the right, and the true, even when the burdens of hard times weigh us down. The Spirit can give us the courage to keep saying yes to life in spite of everything around and within us that shouts no. The Spirit can show us when we’ve hurt somebody deeply, but also give us the right word to bring us back together. The Spirit can move us to care for those we’ve neglected and even for those we’ve seriously disliked. The Spirit can transform our stormy moods of aggression and depression into quiet depths of patience and calm.

The Spirit can free us from hidden animosity towards those closest to us and from open vengefulness against those who’ve hurt us. The Spirit can convict of us of long-standing habits of wrongdoing that we’ve ignored before, but that we suddenly realize have messed us up big-time. The Spirit can give us strength to throw off subtle distractions that drain us away from the life of love for which we’re made. The Spirit can give us joy in the midst of our sorrows and satisfaction in the course of our everyday routines. The Holy Spirit can come and make a way out of no way.

Therefore, as people of the Spirit, we never lose hope. We stay on our tiptoes- expectant, eager, sometimes even nervous. For the Holy Spirit that gave birth to the church so long ago continues to prod, cajole, and call us forward. Just when we’re all settled in and comfortable with the way things are, there comes a rush of wind, a still small voice, a breath of fresh air, and flaming tongues of fire. The Holy Spirit comes and we can’t stay the same. Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff