

Pastor's Message – 5/28/23  
Acts 2:1-21

Today, in the Church, we celebrate Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was given to the first disciples. And much can be said about today as I said last Sunday about Ascension Day. Neither Ascension Day nor Pentecost are major holidays in the United States. To my knowledge, there are no retailers who advertise discounts for Pentecost, no restaurants that prepare a Pentecost special, no major employers that close down the Monday after Pentecost as a paid holiday. However, like Ascension Day, there are Pentecost greeting cards available.

But, for Christians, Pentecost may be the most important day of the year. Christmas is an important day, but a day of small beginnings. Easter is the greatest victory in all of human history. But Pentecost is an explosion when what was once hidden is now on public display for all to hear and understand.

Our Bible reading today sounds like it could be the roll call at a United Nations plenary session: “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs ....” Such a gathering is becoming much more common in our everyday life as cultures, languages, and nationalities mix and mingle. Can you imagine the power if all the different groups in society today would join together and unify? That’s a major theme on Pentecost Sunday in the coming of the Holy Spirit and the power brought to the disciples by and in the Holy Spirit.

The power of wind has been known for a long time. As I was thinking about the power of wind, I started thinking about a song from Alan Lerner and Frederick Lowe’s 1951 California Gold Rush musical, “Paint Your Wagon.” You may know one of the songs from that musical, inspired by the wind:

Away out here they got a name  
For rain and wind and fire  
The rain is Tess, the fire Joe,  
And they call the wind Maria ...  
Maria blows the stars around  
And sends the clouds a’flyin’  
Maria makes the mountains sound  
Like folks were up there dying ...  
Maria, Maria, they call the wind, Maria.

Lerner and Lowe were inspired to write the song by a 1941 novel, *Storm*, by George Rippey Stewart, whose protagonist is named Maria (also with the distinctive pronunciation, mah-RYE-a). Stewart described why: “The soft Spanish pronunciation is fine for some heroines, but our Maria here is too big for any man to embrace and much too boisterous.”

The power available in the Holy Spirit, a Holy Wind, describes for us the reality of God’s third person. A wind moves things. Think of leaves blowing around on a blustery autumn day or snow blowing in a blizzard. Think of the loud flapping sound of a flag on a flagpole on an unrelentingly windy day when you think the wind might rip the flag right off the pole. Think of the wind filling the sails of a sailboat and moving it swiftly through the water. Wind is about

movement. It is much harder to ride my bicycle against the wind than into the wind. Much faster, and easier too, to ride with the wind at my back.

The power of wind gives us an opportunity to reassess whether we as individual Christians and as a Church are riding against the wind or with the wind of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost Sunday is an opportunity to reassess what we, the people of God, are doing with God's gift to us.

Pentecost gives us an opportunity to revisit what it means to be faithful to our core values and mission. It gives us the opportunity to reconsider why we exist and what our mission is as a Church. It is the Holy Spirit who will empower us to do extraordinary things. It is the Holy Spirit who will unify us in both message and mission.

After Jesus' crucifixion, His resurrection, and then His Ascension, His disciples were still not clear on their mission – what their purpose was. But then, when the Holy Spirit entered a house full of Jesus-followers, it created a kind of powerhouse. It filled the apostles with new life, enabling them to communicate with a diverse group of people, speak boldly to a large crowd and fulfill the prophecy of Joel. The Spirit generated a more energetic and vibrant community of faith, which was connected in new ways with the surrounding community.

The apostles needed power. And they got it in an unexpected way.

Two hundred years before the birth of Christ, coal mining started in China. Then, about 800 years later, the first windmill was constructed in Iran. Human beings have always needed power, and for centuries, they have pulled it from both the ground and the air.

Around the year 1700, the Maori people began to use geothermal power for cooking and heating. In 1868, the first modern solar power plant was built in Algiers. We think of geothermal and solar as being new technologies, but they're not.

In 1859, the first oil well was drilled in Pennsylvania. This fueled the gas-powered automobile developed by Karl Benz in 1885. Oil and gas are at the heart of the internal combustion engines that have propelled cars and trucks ever since.

When "nuclear energy" is discussed, it's almost always in reference to nuclear fission, which generates energy by splitting atoms — and is the source of power for nuclear weapons and all of the nuclear generators in operation today.

Nuclear fusion, on the other hand, occurs when two positively charged nuclei merge. It's the same kind of reaction that powers our sun. ... That fusion releases energy, and if maintained, the ongoing reaction creates more energy than it consumes.

Acts tells us that when the day of Pentecost had come, the followers of Jesus "were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability" (Acts 2:1-4).

The Holy Spirit came with "a sound like the rush of a violent wind." Like the "wind from God" that swept over the face of the waters on the first day of creation (Genesis 1:2). Like the breath that Jesus breathed on his disciples when he said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22). Wind, breath, Spirit — they are all the same creative and life-giving gift from God.

*We benefit from numbers, from being "all together," just as the first apostles did. We need to be in community with one another if our faith and Christian commitment is going to grow.*

This means we put a focus on gathering for worship and on working together in ministry and mission.

We need to gather in numbers to be the church. Jesus is with us when we are together in community, just as he promised us in Matthew, saying, “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (18:20). Assembling for community worship and Bible study gives us the most inspiration, insight, and guidance. When we stop taking part, our faith tends to cool off. If the isolation of the pandemic taught us anything, it is that gathering is a critical factor in the vitality of the church.

Assemblies are also needed for effective ministry and mission. Individuals can have brilliant and creative ideas, but implementation requires a team. Far too often, individuals pursue ministry ideas on their own, only to become frustrated when they cannot achieve their dreams. For any effort to be successful, at least five passionate people must commit themselves to it. Ministry and mission require numbers.

*As Christians, we also need to be the right size.* This has nothing to do with the height or weight of individuals, nor does it align with the number of people in a congregation. Instead, Christians need to be open to catch the wind of the Holy Spirit and then act boldly in the world. A Church needs to be aware of the gifts and graces that are present in the Church to do what it has been given the mission and ability to do. God has put each individual here for a reason and for a specific purpose and in the gift of the Holy Spirit, we can know just what our particular mission is supposed to be.

*The final secret to spiritual power is place.* This means being in the right place at the right time, just as the apostles were in the right place, Jerusalem, at the right time, the day of Pentecost. For many of us, there will be places that are the right spot for us: Home, school, work, neighborhood, gym, church. We need to position ourselves correctly to catch the wind. Sometimes we need to leave the comfort of familiar places to accomplish our purposes.

The apostles declared the wonders of God to a group of strangers. Who is the stranger that *you* need to approach? Peter stood up to a hostile crowd and spoke the truth. Where do *you* need to take a stand about something that is important to you and to God? The apostles were pushed into the streets by God’s powerful Spirit. What is the step that *you* need to take, in response to the movement of the Spirit?

It is almost firefly season and I look forward to their appearance and their blinking glow in the near future. Although they certainly aren’t the brightest object in the night sky, they are hard to miss. They don’t glow continuously, but blink on and off. They glow in short bursts, creating moments of light. As Christians we are not always on or perfect, but we do have moments when we light up and illuminate the word, and even if it is not sustained, we can share God’s love at the right moment--at just the right time. Each follower of Jesus has their time and their place to share the light of God to others in the darkness of our world.

This may not require you to be especially eloquent or have a convincing speech ready. It doesn’t mean you have a degree in Christian apologetics or narrative evangelism. But it does mean you are willing, when asked, to speak about our own experience of Christ. All you need to do is tell your own experience and why your contact with Christ has made a difference. For example:

- “I can no longer be comfortable with my prejudices.”

- “I have real peace that stays with me, even when everything is going wrong.”
- “I am less judgmental and more able to forgive.”
- “I never knew a time when I was not a Christian, but I’m convinced it enlarges my spirit.”
- “I know a joy and contentment in my life I never knew before.”
- “My natural inclination is to think only of myself. But because of Christ, I can no longer ignore the needs of others.”
- “The guilt I lived with has been taken away.”
- “It has put a song in my heart.”
- “I cannot sin in peace.”
- “Christ has given my life a purpose.”

I don’t know if everyone one of the sermons I have preached has made a difference, but it happens often enough that someone will say, that that is just what they needed to hear on that day and that gives me the hope and commitment to go on. I put my hope and trust in the power of the Holy Spirit, hopefully moving within me.

The Holy Spirit is a creative force in our lives, just as the wind of God was a creative power in the making of the heavens and the earth. In Acts, the Spirit creates the Christian community, which is why Pentecost is sometimes called the “birthday” of the church.

Notice that God’s Spirit is poured out on a collection of believers. “The Holy Spirit is not a ‘personal’ gift from God that each believer privatizes,” says biblical professor Robert Wall. The fact that the Spirit appeared to a group is “the distinguishing mark of a *people* belonging to God.”

We tend to have an individualistic view of faith in the United States, and many people talk about having a personal relationship with Jesus. There is nothing wrong with that, but what is created by the Spirit on Pentecost is a distinctive and powerful *community* faith.

The challenge for us as the Christian community is to be simultaneously both one and many. This means that we are one in our worship of the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But we are many in our expressions of the faith, because we are connected to the Trinity as Christians who come from a wide variety of backgrounds.

One and many. That may seem like an impossible contradiction, but remember that the Triune God is also both one and many: One God in three persons. In God’s own self is a single God who is also a community made up of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We need to remember that the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost to a diverse collection of believers, and this Spirit created something new and powerful: The Christian community.

The spiritual power of the Holy Spirit is needed today, if we are going to be part of a church that brings life, joy, and hope to the world. Peter told the crowd that God’s Spirit was going to change their lives for the better: “Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,” he said, “and your young men shall see visions, and your old men will dream dreams. In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on my servants—men and women alike—and they will prophesy.” (v. 17-18). ‘I will pour out my Spirit upon all people (v. 17b).

The power of the Holy Spirit is a gift unasked for and undeserved, but all we have to do is receive it, accept, and use it.