

Spirit Alive  
(Acts 1:4, Acts 2:1-21)

Pentecost is one of those days in the church year, like Christmas and Easter, which is more or less the same year after year. Every year you have the same scripture from Acts. I think that by now I have probably preached on the Pentecost story twenty-seven times. I can imagine two church members standing in the supermarket line. "Are you going to church tomorrow, Curt?" one asks. "No, Stan, it's just going to be a re-run." I remember the first Pentecost sermons I preached. I had the idea in my head that if only, somehow, I as a pastor could get my congregation to follow that pattern of the early church at Pentecost, then in no time, people in the pews would be blown away with spiritual experience. They would witness to their friends and the church would double in size. If only they would wait for the Spirit, and devote themselves to prayer. It was kind of a plan your work and work your plan deal. It is easy to think of scriptures as recipes to follow. Seven easy steps to accomplish something for God or for yourself. The other day I received an e-mail from a pastor in Colorado who claimed that he was very interested in our congregation. Never mind that he did not address the e-mail to me personally. He said he had a few simple steps to follow for church growth. He said that he began his congregation in a house with twelve people. Now, he said, they have just broken ground on a building for 12,000 people. Twelve to twelve thousand. That would be quite a trick for Jackson. I don't think we have twelve thousand people. It's easy to see scripture as a recipe. If we do the right thing, God will respond. But as I moved through the years, I realized that this passage is not so much about what we do, but what God does. It is not our power, it is not our following a recipe that brings life, it is God's living Spirit that makes us new.

It is easy to think that Scriptures are a way that we can get a handle on God. Really, it is the other way around. Scriptures urge us to listen carefully to discern what God wants us to be doing. God is looking to have a handle in our lives, not to give us a handle on how to manipulate God into achieving the desires of our hearts, even if they be spiritual desires. The story of Pentecost gives us an idea how profound and complete God's power is.

I think this is what Jesus was trying to tell Nicodemus. Jesus said that the Spirit of God is like the wind in the trees over which we have no control. We can hear it and see it moving tree branches around, but we cannot control it. I was at a friend's house the other day. We were watching the tree branches moving outside the window. If I had said, look, those branches are moving all by themselves. They are waving at us. He would have said, you're crazy tree branches can't move themselves. It's the wind. When it comes to our relationship to God, some focus almost entirely upon our actions. What must we do. We need to accept Christ as Lord and Savior. What Jesus was trying to say is that when we hunger more for God's presence, when we make a commitment, our actions are like the branch waving in the wind. Branches don't move themselves, they are moved by the wind. We hunger, we thirst, we find ourselves moved to praise, or commit our lives, to follow Jesus, to become more involved because God's Spirit, like the wind, began to move in us long before we even thought about taking any action on our own. When Jesus commanded his disciples to wait for the Spirit to come, he was not giving them seven easy steps to success in church growth,

he was admonishing them to be open to God's presence. He wanted them to remember that it is God's power that changes lives.

And so they did. They waited. When the Spirit came, it was a compelling and exciting spectacle. More than that it was confusing and a little scary. A place which was quiet is filled with a noise that sounded like a gale force wind. It was so different and loud that people came running from all over to see what was going on, and when they arrived they had different opinions of what was going on. Some thought the disciples were speaking in real languages. Others thought they were just drunk.

When the Holy Spirit has her (in Hebrew the word for Spirit – ruah - is feminine in gender) way in our lives, it can be scary indeed. Ted Foote and Alex Thornberg give this illustration of how disorienting it can be to attend a church which celebrates the Spirit's presence in a different way. "Kevin had spent Saturday night with his best friend, Steve, so he went to Steve's church with in that morning. It was a worship experience very different from his own Presbyterian Church's worship. People were clapping and dancing in the aisles, some people had their hands in the air waving them around and saying, 'Alleluia.' One or two people were even shaking on the ground and saying strange words that sounded like gibberish. When Kevin asked his friend about what was going on, Steve told him that they were speaking in tongues. 'Don't you have the Holy Spirit at your church?' Steve queried. 'I have heard that Presbyterians aren't ever filled with the Holy Spirit. You don't even like to pray in public.' Kevin didn't know what to say. He thought it was kind of fun to dance in worship, but he knew the people in his church would have a heart attack if any even clapped, much less got out of their seat." (*Being Presbyterian in the Bible Belt*, p. 51)

There is no one way that the Spirit moves. Not everyone experiences the Spirit in the same way the early disciples did. Very few encounter the spirit as Saul did, knocked completely off his horse and blind for three days. For most the Spirit has been quietly at work in them all their lives. They might be able to talk about some particularly emotional moments at church camp, or at a conference, but for the most part they live their spirituality quietly.

I wish that Presbyterians could show more emotion in their worship. We shout at football games. We cry at weddings. And yet when we come to give praise to the most powerful and awesome person in the universe we are very restrained. We recite the Apostles' Creed. "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." Those listening would think we were reading the daily obituaries. We are talking about **GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY, CREATOR OF HEAVEN AND EARTH!** I have fond memories of attending the New Wilmington Missionary Conference. On the last day of the conference at evening vespers, the girls would meet under arched dome of Orr Auditorium, and the boys would meet on the hillside overlooking the lake. There each would be given an opportunity to tell about the ways that God had touched their lives during the week. It was not a one size fits all invitation to come forward. As one after another spoke, each began to hear the different ways God had been at work, forgiving, encouraging, calling. It became clear there was more at work in our lives than what we see and feel. And the young people knew that they were not alone in their experiences. Barbara Brown Taylor tells of a similar experience that she had each summer at Montreat, North Carolina. During those "say so" times you could almost feel the Spirit sweeping down. Young people would come away with tears streaming down their

faces. So much power in the Spirit, if we only open our eyes and hearts to see it and welcome it.

What can be scary is when we try to control the Spirit, or when church leaders try to use emotion to manipulate people. Music, altar calls, songs, sermon can all be directed to whip up emotion and to play, often on fear, to get a response out of those present.

This is not our pattern as Presbyterians. Even so, I hope that we will be open to greater expression of genuine emotion in our service. I hope that we will be open to new music and new ways of greeting one another.

When the Spirit of God came, disciples began to talk about the mighty acts of God. One mark of the Holy Spirit is that when it comes into our lives, our attention is directed toward God, not towards ourselves. For many faith is about themselves. It is about how good, or how bad they have been. It's about whether they are going to make it or not. I have often wondered if it wouldn't be nice to be in a congregation where people wanted to be an elder or a deacon because it was a coveted position—kind of a spiritual status thing. People would stand in line to become deacons and elders and would fight for to be on church committees. And yet when I look at this passage, I see that it's not about us at all, it is about the God's power. Not about our righteousness, but God's. The Christians in Corinth were given wonderful spiritual gifts, but they ended up misusing them. The gifts became a way for them to prove their spiritual status. They compared who had the best gift. It would be like a surgeon becoming so fascinated with his surgical scalpels that he played with them and forgot that they were there for the purpose of healing others. And so Paul had to tell them that gifts were there to build up others and that far more important than gifts was love.

The other hallmark of the Holy Spirit is that it directs our hearts outward. When Jesus began his ministry he referred to the Holy Spirit. He said that God had put the Spirit upon him so that he could bind up broken hearted people, bring good news to poor people, help people to see and walk and be free from debt. When the Holy Spirit truly comes into our lives our hearts turn from looking inward to looking toward a gracious and powerful God whose mighty acts save us, and outward to broken and needy people who need that living water in their lives too.

The passage ends by promising, "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." Fred Craddock puts it this way, "There are so many people who walk out in the morning to go to work, out of just total wreckage—domestic wreckage, personal, all relationships just shot. Trying to hang on, but still feeling more and more a victim." (*Craddock Stories*, Chalice Press, p. 76) They are wounded by guilt, by anxiety, controlled by resentment, trying hard to find something that can make them feel good about themselves and their situation. They need, we all need, the mighty power of God acting in our lives, so that we can be healed, made whole, saved. Jesus looked about at the people in his day and had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. What a wonderful promise, that to call upon God's loving name can bring us the healing and wholeness that we so need.

Our world has changed a lot since the Holy Spirit came down at Pentecost. But God has not changed, and human need has not changed. There are no simple easy steps to harnessing the power of God's spirit in our lives. Nor do we need to wait for the Spirit to come. The Holy Spirit is present as we gather as Christ's body. Especially as

we gather around the table for the sacrament of Holy Communion. Let us seek to open our hearts to that presence, careful to listen to hear what God is saying, willing to embrace a side of worship and spirituality that may be different—even a little scary. As God's Spirit moves in our lives, we will be like limbs of trees that are moved and directed by God's power.