



“The Power that Works Within Us”

John 7:37-39; Romans 8:14-17, 26-27

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Pentecost Sunday

I inherited a strange Pentecost Sunday tradition at my last church. The minister always preached a sermon about the baptism of the Holy Spirit and during the sermon would speak in tongues, a practice in Pentecostal Christian circles. He ended his sermon with an altar call in which he invited people to the front of the church to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit at which point they would speak in tongues.

In our Reformed tradition, altar calls are odd. Speaking in tongues is odder still. As you can imagine, my predecessor’s Pentecost tradition was not well received in that upper middle-class suburban – and I might add, traditional – congregation. In fact the practice embarrassed many people in the church. Many people decided not to show up on Pentecost Sunday. And, needless to say, I did not continue the tradition – to the relief of the congregation.

An explanation is in order. The baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues is part of what is called the Charismatic Movement. My predecessor back in Minneapolis was a Charismatic Christian. He had a charismatic experience that changed his life and he wanted to share it with the world.

The Charismatic Movement “officially” began in 1960 when an Anglo-Catholic Episcopal priest, Father Dennis Bennett, announced to his upscale Episcopal church in Van Nuys, California, that he had recently been baptized in Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues.

His congregation was not amused, and Father Bennett soon resigned. He ended up in a dying Episcopal Church in Seattle, which promptly experienced charismatic renewal and continues to be a powerful religious influence in the Pacific Northwest.

In the meantime, the Charismatic Movement moved rapidly through old mainline churches. It was a genuine renewal movement for decades. It was a revolt against overly rational, cold, traditional religion that had managed to make the Christian faith boring – and dead.

Charismatic Christianity features a particular religious experience. It is best described as religious ecstasy, most often including speaking in “unknown” tongues, healing, and more “otherworldly” manifestations of the Spirit. Worship is lively, joyous and free of physical or emotional restraint. Charismatic Christians believe the Day of Pentecost, the day when the Holy Spirit descended on the early Christian movement “like a mighty wind,” is to be understood literally. It happens here and now.

The good news is this: millions of Christians experienced real renewal. Thousands of churches were genuinely renewed. Dead churches came alive and a renewal stream, one of many in the ‘60s and ‘70s, entered American Christianity.

There is bad news too. The Charismatic Movement was, more often than not, divisive. It seems that conflict and church splits followed Charismatic renewal. That is no small issue. Scripture is clear that the work of the Spirit is unity, not division.

More significantly, charismatic renewal was often a large religious experience with little moral content. In my pastoral experience, the charismatic movement was accompanied by demands, threats, power moves, self-righteousness, a judgmental spirit and name-calling. I've been told in no uncertain terms that I had no authority in spiritual matters or interpreting Scripture since I had not experienced the baptism of the Spirit. Granted, non-charismatics often exhibit the same divisive characteristics, but then, according to the charismatics, they are the ones spirit-filled, and it seems the burden of proof lies on their side of the question.

What began as a transforming movement ended up a destructive force in the very church it intended to renew, and seems these days to be a spent force in mainline congregations. The renewal of mainline churches is underway, but from different sources.

Happily, there is an alternative narrative of the Holy Spirit. That narrative contains the power to transform lives and churches, but without the bells and whistles of the charismatic movement. Contemporary hymn writer Carl Daw has named this experience of the Holy Spirit "Like the Murmur of a Dove's Song." My spiritual life is witness to this alternative narrative.

Forty years ago, when I was in my last year of seminary, a terrifying reality dawned on me: in five months or so, I would be a Christian pastor in a real congregation. I panicked. I wasn't ready, and I knew it. Oh, intellectually I was ready. I was finishing a fine theological education taught by excellent professors. My mind had been well formed by three years of theological training.

But my soul wasn't ready. My heart and character were not yet formed by the gospel. I was not spiritually formed. And I knew life in the church is far more than a life of the mind. It is soul work. Ministry is the intersection of real life and the Christian faith.

I joined several other panic-stricken seniors in a noon prayer and study group. The focus of our prayer and conversation was what St. Paul calls the "fruit of the Spirit." It's a list of consequences for a life of faith. When a person follows Jesus Christ, gives their life to God and God's agenda, that decision has specific outcomes. Paul teaches that faith is an invitation for Christ to live and work in us – and Christ's Spirit, also called the Holy Spirit, creates the following: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control," (Galatians 5:22).

We asked God to plant those character traits in us, and we talked about what such a life might look like – in us and in our congregations.

Then I noticed the oddest thing: the fruit of the spirit was forming in me. I was actually changing, being re-formed by God. My life was conforming to precisely the kind of life Jesus taught about.

I quickly discovered there was much more work to be done. And, now, forty years later, there is still more work yet to be done. Making a real Christian is a lifelong project never complete in this life.

I also discovered that God is much more interested in my essential character, the shape of my soul, than the fine points of good theology or any style of Christian worship. The life of the mind is a wonderful thing; however, the life of the soul must accompany any Christian life of the mind.

The Holy Spirit offers an experience of a particular kind.

As he was preparing his disciples for life when he was gone, Jesus promised them that when he left them, he would leave them his Spirit. His work in them and on their characters would continue. “The Holy Spirit will be your helper,” he told them. “My Spirit in you will be your connection to eternity, the source of power for creating Christian character.”

Our Gospel Lesson puts it another way. Jesus stood in the Temple at feast time and declared, “Come to me and I will give you life from above, and this life will bubble up in you like a spring of water.”

The power of the Holy Spirit is not just any religious experience; it has particular shape, namely the character of God revealed in Christ and given to us. The Reformers called it the “witness of the Spirit.” And that witness has unique content.

The life of the Spirit is neither some vague spirituality, nor a mere burst of spiritual power. It is much more than inner tranquility. It is divine power with specific shape and direction. The power of God to transform us moves us toward something particular.

We have to pay attention. It doesn’t happen spontaneously or accidentally. We have to listen to Jesus’ teaching and its particular content. We must learn the “way of God” within us. And we have to follow its lead over the long haul.

The content and direction of the Christian life are simply (and profoundly) this: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

This life from God is what happens when Easter lands in real life. Christ alive in us and in the world has equally real consequences. It transforms those who invite Christ into their lives – and pay attention when he arrives.

It is crucial to add another side to our relationship to the Holy Spirit. In the longest discussion of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, St. Paul notes that much of life seems futile. The headlines make us groan. “Why?” we ask. Lethal earthquakes, destructive oil spills, fouled waterways, hungry children, AIDS orphans – we groan at the futility.

Did you see this morning’s *Times* front-page top right? It’s a picture of men in an overcrowded Haitian prison. Anyone with any heart has to groan at the sight.

In a powerful metaphor, Paul says the creation itself groans in futility, longing for its redemption from the predation, corruption and destruction. It’s not supposed to be this way. The earth is a gift to preserve and nurture.

More important still, the futility that makes the creation and us groan makes God groan. We groan and God joins us. Read the headlines and hear God groan. God is with us.

I was once a student pastor in southern Indiana. My little country church knew its share of futility and groaning. Recent conflict had split the church. A group left to start another church. The consequences affected everything in the congregation’s life. It was a broken church filled with wounded people.

One lay couple, both church leaders, stood head and shoulders above all the others. Byron and Wilma were delightful, positive, steady people who held the church together in the hard times. They ran a very successful farm and by every account were successful business people, community leaders, and publically recognized Christian people.

I got the phone call one Saturday afternoon. Byron was on the phone with bad news. Their son, who just finished his university year abroad, was in trouble. Coming through customs, authorities found a trove of stolen art in his baggage.

Byron asked my help in sharing the news with the congregation the next day, Sunday. They came to church and sat up front rather than their usual seats near the rear. When

time came for the sermon, I went and stood by them. I used the sermon to share the news with the congregation and to suggest it was time for the church to support and care for Wilma and Byron.

We groaned together and that little broken congregation gathered around their wounded friends in a healing and gracious moment of ministry. For a brief and shining moment that little church experienced the “murmur of the dove’s song” as the Spirit groaned with us.

The character of the Christian gospel embraced, shaped, comforted and healed us. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control were on display as a congregation bore witness to the power of the Holy Spirit.

I can think of few matters more practical than the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian disciple. The fruit of the Spirit gives us the power to cope with life no matter what life hands us. The character of the gospel teaches essential skills for positive relationships. Spouses, parents, children, whole congregations of people shaped by the “power that works within us” bear witness to the presence of God on earth.

That witness can, in fact, reach out to touch the larger world. Peggy Noonan, the noted conservative columnist, wrote a piece in the *Wall Street Journal* back in March that is being quoted widely. Noonan’s subject is the uncivil discourse that is poisoning American culture. More importantly, according to Noonan, the anger level in our land is dangerous. Death threats, vandalism and threats to public officials in both political parties are common.

Noonan says that every public official she’s talked to fears something bad will happen soon. She urged her readers, conservative and liberal alike, to lower the temperature of public discourse any way we can – “just lower it.”

That counsel comes from somewhere specific. Noonan is a devout Catholic Christian whose soul is being formed by the gospel. Her faith, shaped by the Holy Spirit, is bearing witness to the larger world.

We, too, in our own spheres of influence, where we work, live and play have souls in process. We are people being formed by the power that works within us, the Holy Spirit. We are obliged to share that work with each other and with the world.

But, mind you, for all that to happen, you have to ask!

Amen.