



## *“The Promise”*

John 15:26-27; Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:22-27

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Day of Pentecost

Pentecost is the third biggest day in the life of the church – or at least it’s supposed to be. With Christmas and Easter, Pentecost is one of the three great feast days of the church calendar. Today all around the world, churches are decorated in red, the liturgical color for Pentecost, and parishioners often dress in red in honor of the great celebration.

Pentecost celebrates the birthday of the church. On this day, nearly 2,000 years ago, the Jesus Movement became the Christian Church. Pentecost also marks the moment when the Holy Spirit of God came in a new and powerful way to create the church, and to live in congregations like this one, which become what the New Testament call, “Temples of the Holy Spirit.”

Pentecost celebrates the day history was dramatically altered, a day when some very ordinary folks became quite extraordinary. On Pentecost, God entered the world in a new, creative and powerful way. We are heirs of the Day of Pentecost.

However, as you might have noticed, we’re a bit underprepared for a rollicking birthday celebration. You’ve probably also noticed that Pentecost doesn’t get the kind of media coverage as Christmas and Easter. You won’t find Pentecost Hallmark cards to send to friends and family. I doubt if many families get together today for a Pentecost cookout or party. Even if we took Pentecost seriously, it often falls on Memorial Day weekend and would be swallowed up by that national holiday.

Truth be told, most Protestant churches don’t take Pentecost seriously. Many Christians are “spooked” by the idea of Pentecost or a conversation about the Holy Spirit. On the one hand, many of us are old enough to remember when the Holy Spirit was called the Holy Ghost, a rather off-putting term for church children! Recently, the word “spirit” has been emptied of any power or rhetorical punch. The modern use of the word is rather pale, shapeless, like the “Spirit of ’76,” something with little objective content. When modern Christians do speak of the Holy Spirit, they often mean something like “God’s friendly assistant” sent to help us from time to time.

On the other hand, most American Christians are quite content to leave Pentecost to the Pentecostals, our embarrassing cousins in God’s diverse family. After all, their tongue-speaking, faith-healing, over-the-top worship style simply won’t work in our religious world. We are naturally suspicious of Pentecostal claims of access to the supernatural. We prefer our religion to be rational and under control – namely, our control. We’d rather trust our own spirits than God’s Spirit.

For Protestants in general, the Holy Spirit is the missing member of the Trinity seldom encountered in our religious experience. There’s an old joke that goes this way: The Holy Trinity gathered to plan the summer. It seems all three needed some time off given the

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pressure of managing this disordered and recalcitrant world. God the creator said, "I'm going to visit the mountains of the American West. I'd like to relax in the beauty of my creation." Christ the redeemer had another plan, "I'm going to visit my homeland. It seems the Holy Land is experiencing terrible violence and I'd like to see if I can lend a hand." The Holy Spirit then said, "I'm planning to visit places I've never been before. I'm spending the summer visiting Congregational Churches!"

We chuckle because there's enough truth in that exaggeration to strike home. We don't pay much attention to the Holy Spirit. It's an odd inattention given our roots in the Reformed Tradition. Our tradition, following John Calvin's lead, has organized the church and theological reflection around a theological principle called "the inner witness of the Holy Spirit" (*testimonium spiritus sancti internum*).

From the creation, God's Spirit is God's presence in the world and the dynamic behind God's work in the world. Without the Holy Spirit at work in us and in the world, there is no Israel, no church, no Bible and no Christians. The Spirit creates them all.

But we're forgetful. After all, we have our ways of getting things done – sort of. We plod along doing church the same old way as usual and don't seem to make much progress. We depend on the bylaws, committees, and traditions to get things done. We seldom depend on God's Spirit.

Meanwhile, the Pentecostal Movement, which we fear, and which does take the Holy Spirit seriously, is the fastest growing movement in Christian history. The growing edge of modern Christianity is the Pentecostal movement and the future of the Christian Church is likely Pentecostal.

So the question for us on this Pentecost Sunday is this: How can we restore historic dynamic of the Christian Church, the Holy Spirit, to old, historic, traditional churches like ours? Such a restoration does not require Pentecostal theology or experience. It does require opening our lives and our churches to God's dynamic presence here and now.

As usual, it's best to go back to the original sources, in this case the story of Pentecost told by Luke in Acts 2. The old story needs to be heard and interpreted in light of our context and our time. This is Christianity 101, so listen carefully.

They'd been waiting ten days just like Jesus instructed them. Before he left, he told them to wait in Jerusalem. Though he'd be gone, he promised he would send his Spirit to be with them. There were about 120 of them, including Peter, John, Mary (Jesus' mother), Jesus' brother, and the women from Galilee.

They were confused and scared. They knew Jesus had given them a very large assignment: the salvation of the world! Their mission was to take the good news about Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth.

They also knew everything was against them. Their culture made it quite difficult to cross national, racial, and cultural borders. A hostile Empire stood against any movement that called for an allegiance beyond Rome. The religious institutions of the day opposed any rival movement. How could they take the seed planted deep inside themselves and plant it in others so it took root all over the world?

They needed help. So they waited, prayed, and took care of business. They choose a twelfth apostle to replace the disgraced traitor, Judas Iscariot. And they waited for God's next move.

The little band of disciples did know that their mission from Jesus was part of a larger promise nearly as old as the people of God. For centuries the prophets told of a day when God would restore the world to its original design. Obviously, the world was off course and lost in the consequences of rebellion against God and God's ways. Then, as now, the

world was a cruel and predatory place – dangerous, even lethal. Forces that destroy life and the best things in life are hard at work in the world turning the best things in life, like love, into cruelty and hatred. Relationships, meant to nourish, can break and sometimes damage us. Power so necessary to managing ourselves and our world more often than not corrupts itself and causes damage. We live in a world where prisons, armies, and police forces are necessary, where children too quickly lose their innocence.

Someday, the prophets of God declared, the world will regain its innocence and peace; righteousness and justice will reign. Jesus preached that God’s restoration was underway and now the disciples were responsible for managing and growing God’s new creation.

The point was how, how could this bedraggled group of survivors with no human resources at hand create a spiritual and social force capable of changing the world?

I suspect they were surprised by the answer. Luke pulls out all the stops on his rhetorical pipe organ as he attempts to describe the indescribable: the day God came to earth in a new and powerful way. He piles up the metaphors to paint a picture that defies easy understanding.

What we do know is that by the end of the day, a social-spiritual movement was underway. The little group of 120 grew to 3,000 by evening. An international, multicultural gathering in Jerusalem heard God’s good news that included them all, and the band of frightened disciples were boldly proclaiming that God was at work in a new and wonderful way.

God’s Spirit came and empowered them, created a church, and the rest is history.

For those of us who are scared by Luke’s description of Pentecost, John offers a gentler version. He puts it simply, Jesus gathered his disciples and breathed on them. “Receive my Spirit,” he said. And the life of God entered them and the potential for a new world was born. According to John, it was like the creation where God breathed into a lump of clay and it became a living soul. It was creation again – in a new way.

It’s much more than a fascinating story that changed the world. The meaning of the story is both simple and profound.

It is profound because we still need help if we are to continue God’s creative work in the world. If we make a difference in our world it will require resources beyond ourselves. We need God. Left to ourselves – on our own – our humanity will win every time.

We need God’s help to make our relationships true and faithful, our families strong and nourishing, our work more than making money, our lives more than just existing. And God offers the Holy Spirit, God’s life, to help us become what we ought to be and do what we’re called to do.

How sad when the church forgets the dynamic center, the Holy Spirit, that makes us more than a mere collection of good people trying to do good things.

The greatest Congregational theologian of the last century was the British scholar, C. H. Dodd. Dodd grew up in a Welsh Congregational church which he later described as “etiolated Calvinism.” The living experience of the Puritans, which set hearts aflame and made congregations powerful, was long gone. Only the forms remained. With some success, he set out to restore that “living experience” in the churches of Great Britain.

Pentecost is an opportunity to invite the living God into our lives, our families, and our community of faith. God’s Spirit will disturb us and enliven us, comfort us and upend us, too. But if we dare to invite God’s Spirit into our congregation and ourselves, we will be different and we will do more than we imagined we could if left on our own.

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The task in the 21st century is as daunting as back in the 1st century. Doing God's work is impossible. We need help.

The good news I bring you is this: Jesus said that if we human parents know enough to give good gifts to our children, God will certainly give the Holy Spirit to all who ask. So, he said, ask and keep on asking! Good news indeed.

Amen.

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