



First United Church of Oak Park

Spirit of What?

Acts 2:1-21

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My seminary graduation took place the weekend of Pentecost several years ago. The sanctuary in which my graduation was held was, like ours, decked out in red flames and images of wind and doves. During the opening song, there was an attempt at a creative worship element. Pentecost is the season when worship planners sometimes get too big for their britches and try new things they probably have no business doing; but sometimes it results in something truly meaningful. Other times, like at my graduation, it results in injuries. A dancer held a long stick, from the end of which hung a large cardboard dove, a biblical symbol for the Holy Spirit. For whatever reason, this dove seemed to be quite out of the dancer's control as she danced through the aisles. The dove first hit the wall as she came down the side aisles, and then as she turned down one of the center aisles the dancer lost control and several people literally got smacked in the head by the Holy Spirit. I think that's a great image of what it feels like for the Holy Spirit to come among us.

Pentecost is one of the three big holidays of the church. We have Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. First in the flow of the Christian year is Christmas. Everybody loves Christmas. God with us. Cute little baby in the manger. Pretty angel voices. What's not to love?

Then we get to Easter... Jesus rises from the dead and asks us to go tell the story. Exciting. Resurrection! Hope! Good deal.

Then comes Pentecost... Jesus is out of here and instead of just telling his story, we're supposed to let the spirit take over our very beings so that we can be the ones to do the things Jesus did. Is it any wonder that this is the one holiday that hasn't been commercialized? Fannie May's does not sell cream filled chocolate flames. No one hides tongues of fire for the kids to find. We certainly don't wake up on Pentecost morning to see what the Holy Spirit has left in our red socks.

It's not just the larger culture, it's the holiday the church gets least excited about too. You can see why. It's easy to celebrate Christmas. It's a birthday party. It's easy to celebrate Easter. It's like graduation where Jesus flips his tassel to the other side of eternity... but celebrating Pentecost is like celebrating getting kicked out of the house. This is the moment Jesus is done preparing us, and now we need to figure it out. This is the moment disciples are forced to grow up and become apostles... to stop being an inward facing circled locked in an interior room... now it's time get into the streets...

When the spirit came over the disciples, they did not stay inside and speak in the language of their own hearts. They went into the streets and spoke in the languages of the hearts who needed to hear God's message. When the spirit came over the disciples, they weren't inspired to hold a worship service or hunker back down in their meeting room; they were inspired to go out into the world. The wind of the holy spirit did not stir up inside their hearts; it stirred up the atmosphere like a mighty rushing wind. It blew not just within them but between them, connecting them to those with whom they shared little in common, not even a language.

Many people, when they say they had a spiritual experience, mean that they had some sort of internal, individual shift in their thinking. The book of Acts challenges that understanding of the spirit, because the spirit does not act on behalf of the individual. The spirit acts on behalf of the world. When the spirit affects the individual, it is not for the individual's own sake, it is for the world's sake.

Dr. William Turner who taught pneumatology (which is the word for studying the Holy Spirit) at Duke University said you can call your spiritual experience whatever you want- Holy Spirit, Holy Ghost, Revival, Slain in the Spirit, Glossolalia, Mountain Top Experience - but at the end, if it doesn't result in your having a quarrel with the world, your spiritual experience is very suspect.

When the spiritual experience of Pentecost happens, Peter responds by quoting a pretty intense passage from the prophet Joel about the world ending. It all sounds pretty scary, like the apostles are about to go out and mess some stuff up. Blood, fire, smoke. Is that really what it's like to experience the Holy Spirit?

Now I grew up hearing that the Holy Spirit was our comforter. I thought Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit like a parent gives their child a security blanket to hold in the dark so they can sleep soundly, but Pentecost doesn't sound like that at all. I think that I had that image of comforter because the King James Bible did use the word comforter for the Spirit.

In many ways, I think the Spirit is a comfort. Dr. Turner again reminds us that the word comfort comes from the English root *fortis*, which means to make brave, to make bold, to make strong. We are comforted not so that we can snuggle up and sleep tight. We are comforted so that with no anxiety whatsoever, we can be awake to the realities of our world, moved by the Spirit into uncomfortable places to do uncomfortable things.

When the holy spirit comes, things change. A new world of opportunity opens up to create peace, to make our society just and equitable, to live our values. But of course this new world comes at a cost. The world as we know it ends. The spirit is wind and fire and when wind and fire come through, nothing is left unchanged.

The fire of the Spirit burns away all that which does not serve the community. It burns away misunderstandings and fear. It burns away distrust and anger. It burns away sloth and pride. It burns away all that plagues us like racism and violence and unbridled greed. As much as we want to see the end of those things, being caught up in the spirit of making them end in our world and within ourselves can feel like being smacked in the head by a giant dove in the middle of the sanctuary.

Any of you who have ever felt called by the Spirit to stand up for what you believe or to make a big change know exactly what I'm talking about. If you know the Spirit, you know it is not here just so you can feel comfortable going about your life unaffected. You know the Spirit is not just here for your sake, but you know that you are here for the Spirit's sake.

We as a faith community stand at the precipice of some change. For one, a new pastor is coming, and you are about to learn his name. We know all too well that our journey as a faith community is full of ups and downs. Because of that we have at times become a bit shy about change, scared of our future. But friends, we need not be afraid today. There is a Spirit who will be with us even if things sometimes get a little uncomfortable.

Because of that, we can move boldly into the future God has waiting for us. We can handle whatever may lie ahead. We cannot let the spirit of fear cause us to sabotage what the spirit may want to do among us. We have to live as people who have the boldness of the Spirit: the Spirit that makes us able to burn away fear,

misunderstanding, and distrust. We cannot just be Christmas people who know the sweetness of our faith, or Easter people who know the hope. We have to be Pentecost people who live with the boldness of our faith.

As it says in 2 Timothy chapter one, "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." Because of that we do not have to be afraid or ashamed of the gospel.

This is the good news of Pentecost for us today: that life lived in the Spirit, though it is sometimes as uncomfortable as a smack in the head, and though it is always wildly out of our control, is life lived courageously and in the service of God's coming realm of peace, love, and justice. That is a life worth living. May it always be said of First United Church of Oak Park that we are a Pentecost people. Amen?