

GROUP SPIRIT

June 4, 2017, The Day of Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21, I Corinthians 12:4-7, 12-14; John 20:19-23

First Presbyterian Church

Acts 2:1-21

²When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” ¹³But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

¹⁴But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 12-14

⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

¹²For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

John 20:19-23

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Sermon¹

Have you ever served on a committee that never meets? You’re thinking: “Hey! That’s my kind of committee. Sign me up!” But that’s not what I mean... I mean have you ever served on a committee that never meets *in person*? That *only* has phone meetings? Your name is on the letterhead with their names but you’ve never laid eyes on them... never been in the same room with them... because you *always* do the conference call dial-in thing. You know how it goes: the electronic lady (it’s always a lady) tells you to hold the line till the call administrator arrives... and when he or she does arrive everybody says their name and exchanges greetings like they’re long-lost buddies. But I have to tell you - I find it a very odd and awkward experience. I know it’s efficient saving time and travel. And I know the work mostly gets done. But for me at least it is an unsatisfactory experience because it’s just not the same thing as physically being there. It’s just not like being present in the same room... watching faces and body language – all the nonverbal subtleties of communicating with other human beings. Phone meetings are simply *missing something*.

The truth is for me it’s the same problem when I watch our own or other live-streamed worship services. The sound may be good... the visual isn’t bad... and you may hear a good sermon... but as a worship experience, going to church on a television or computer screen simply *misses something*.

Today is the Day of Pentecost. It recalls an event in ancient Judaism known as the Feast of Weeks... It was called “Weeks” because it took place seven full weeks (or 50 days) after the previous festival – Passover. Jews don’t observe it today, but two thousand years ago it was a big deal - celebrating both the spring barley harvest and the giving of the Law. So Jesus’ disciples – who still consider themselves good Jews – meet together for a quiet celebration. It has been seven weeks since Easter... It’s quite likely that baffling brilliance of the first Easter may be fading a bit. And the disciples are understandably terrified... they’re living in a first-century police state they’re being identified with a man who had just been executed for treason and heresy.

¹ I am indebted to Rev. Michael Lindvall and his sermon “Group Spirit” preached June 8, 2014 to the Brick Presbyterian Church of New York City.

So we can easily imagine this Pentecost party starting out pretty low key – with everybody talking about the past weeks... reliving the details of what had happened... thinking more about what had been rather than what might be. Then something happened that changed everything. There aren't many passages in the Bible where things change as drastically from the beginning of a story to its end. At the *beginning*, these disciples are huddled in a rented room, afraid and not knowing what to do. At the *end* of the story, they're so fired up somebody accuses them of being drunk. And what changed them was that reality and power they will come to name "Spirit" with a capital "S" – Holy Spirit.

Now, here's the thing I want us to notice this morning – the Spirit finds them – as it says in verse 1 – the Spirit APPEARS to them... the Spirit FILLS them when "*they were all together in one place.*" Being "all together in one place" seems to be important.

The same dynamic comes to play in the reading from the Gospel of John. It's another "giving-of-the-Spirit" tale. It's set earlier in the story... just one *day* rather than 50 days after Easter. And again, the Spirit comes upon people who are afraid and hiding. But more importantly, it comes only when – as verse 19 has it – "the disciples had met..." together in the same room, physically present with one another.

And finally, in his mini-sermon to the Jesus followers in Corinth Paul makes the same point – he says that God gives Spirit to people as a group, a diverse community with a variety of talents and abilities. "The body has many members," Paul writes, but there is "one Spirit."

So, what I want you to see is that this is a "group thing" - and that this is a pattern throughout the whole Bible. The Spirit of God – that Divine Wind, that Breath of God, that Holy Spirit, *ruach*, *pneuma*, whatever we name it – seems to prefer to work with people together rather than to do solo work. Not that the Spirit doesn't sometimes work one-on-one... but so many of the "Spirit stories" in the Bible are about the Spirit working in community. Those of you who have served on a Presbyterian session or have been a commissioner to presbytery or General Assembly know that we have this quirky rule for voting at official church meetings. The rule is this: no absentee ballots. Presbyterian polity absolutely prohibits absentee ballots. In order to vote... for your vote to count... you have to actually be there – to be physically present. And the reasoning behind this is biblical – for as these Bible readings suggest, the Holy Spirit works when people are gathered together. And if you're not there... not face-to-face with your sisters and brothers in Christ... you just may miss out on the Spirit who moves and speaks in the midst of community to actually shape how you think and vote. Jesus himself said as much: "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them."

This morning we commissioned 29 youth and six adult advisors. They will depart next Sunday for their work in Washington, DC - a total of 35 missionaries from this congregation. Well, what I want to point out is just HOW MUCH IT MATTERS that you are going *together*. Just imagine what a different experience it would be if you each went on a solo mission trip... riding to DC alone... serving meals on your own... painting walls in solitude... eating dinner by yourself after a full day's work. It just wouldn't be at all the same. But friends, you won't be alone, you'll be there *together*... You'll be with each other. And the Spirit of the Living God (who seems to prefer group work) will be among you. I believe this... I have experienced this... that Jesus

really meant it when he said, *Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them.*” So listen for the Spirit in your midst. Look for it in the people you meet and in each other.

Over the centuries, Christians have developed certain symbols to represent important aspects of our faith. The fish, for instance, was a very early way for people to identify themselves and others as Christians. The shell came to symbolize baptism... the dove, the Holy Spirit... and the cross, Jesus’s saving death. Well, one of the most venerable images in Christian symbolism is to imagine the church – the gathered community of faith – as a ship... as a boat. When you think about it, this is a rich and textured metaphor, this “church-boat”. The sea on which the ship sails is the big old world out there. That sea is sometimes lovely, sometimes deadly; much like the world we navigate every day. Every ship needs a crew, a crew that works together reasonably well – that’s you and me, the crew. Of course, the ship needs a captain; that’s *not* me or Heather, by the way. It’s our Lord, Jesus Christ. And very important is something our vision team noticed as they were searching for an image to help focus our potential building program - and I quote from their statement – We all know the story of Noah: the ark, the animals, the flood, and the dove and the rainbow. God instructed Noah to build the ark to provide a safe place to ride out the storm. That reminded me of the pastor who said: *“Yeah, the church is a lot like Noah’s ark... it sometimes gets pretty stinky on board. But you always have to remember that the rainstorm raging outside is much worse.”* Anyway, the vision team noticed that in the story Noah’s Ark lacked both propulsion and navigation... I guess I had never thought of that. But when I thought about it I realized I don’t think I’ve ever seen a “church-ship” equipped with oars. Because oars would suggest that it’s our human strength... our strength and muscle at the oars that makes the ship move. That’s not true. And of course, I’ve never once seen a church ship with an engine... not even in more modern images... because an engine would suggest that it’s our cleverness... our human ingenuity... something we create... that causes the ship to move. That’s not true either.

No, every image of a “ship-as-church” that I’ve ever seen includes just one thing – one piece of equipment: a sail or maybe two... to catch the wind... the Wind of God, the Breath of God, the Spirit. And the crew? Oh, you need a good crew to watch for the wind... and to trim those sails... *but what actually makes the ship move is the Holy Spirit.*

Let us pray...

PRAYER

Come, Holy Spirit!

Come, Holy Spirit,
and fill us with your love.

Open our eyes to see the presence of God all around us,
in the stillness of this sacred space,
in the busyness and noise of our city streets,
in the joys and celebrations of our lives,
in the tragedies and struggles that break our hearts

Come, Holy Spirit,
give comfort to those who grieve.

Grant them the peace that only you can bring.
Stir within us a trust in life beyond death,
as we ponder the mysteries of Christ's resurrection
and the hope we have in new and everlasting life.

Come, Holy Spirit,
and bring wholeness to the sick.

Strengthen those who are weak;
heal the wounded and broken;
give rest to the weary.

Come, Holy Spirit,
and inspire our warring world to seek peace,
to love our enemies,
to put away our weapons,
to remember the price paid for our freedom,
to care for those who have served.

Come, Holy Spirit,
and ignite a fire in our bones,
a passion for justice that cannot be quenched
until all of your children are loved,
until no one is marginalized or oppressed,
until everyone has the opportunity to thrive,
until the world is transformed and renewed.

Come, Holy Spirit, and revive your church.

Rouse us from complacency;
help us to recognize our gifts for ministry
and to use them in service of others;
transform our hearts and our minds;
fill us with love that overflows;
remind us that there is no greater calling
than to love you with all that we are
and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Gracious God,
give us a glimpse of your kingdom
emerging around us
and drawing us into the new things you are doing in the world.

It is for your kingdom that we now pray,
filled with your Spirit,
using the words Jesus taught us.
Our Father...