

Sermon: The Spirit Testifies

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15**

In the first century, the day of Pentecost was a celebration of the first fruits of the harvest, held fifty days after the Passover. Jerusalem would have been filled with Jews from all over the place specifically to give thanks to God. Luke puts an emphasis on community, and in the reading, we hear from devout Jews from every nation, including Rome, all *together* in one place.

In the Tower of Babel story from Genesis 11, everyone spoke ‘one language and the *same words*’ until God decided to scramble everything, which was actually an act of liberation; but on Pentecost, suddenly the Holy Spirit blew through the house where the twelve apostles were sitting and entered into them in tongues of fire. When the disciples started to speak, the crowd – all those varied individuals in town for the festival – heard them, gathered around, and became a unified group. The Holy Spirit creates and sustains unity.

But there was a problem. Hearing about God’s deeds of power doesn’t guarantee understanding. The crowd understood the *words* but still were perplexed, wondering what it all meant. Not all of them welcomed what they were hearing from these Galilean bumpkins, these simple fishermen, so they tried to take them down a peg by accusing them of being drunk.

Theologian Justo González asked, ‘How is it that some, instead of perceiving a miracle, see only something to mock?’¹ Pentecost, he said, is no miracle for them. And because they fail to perceive the miracle of the Spirit moving among the Galileans, they refused to acknowledge the presence of the Spirit, and that left them lost in their own disbelief.

Jesus predicted all of this in John’s Gospel when he said, in chapter 14, ‘This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you’ (14:17). Only John calls the Holy Spirit the ‘spirit of truth,’ probably because he associates the Spirit with Jesus, who is ‘the way, and the truth, and the life’ (14:6) whom the world also does not receive or know.

The Greek word for *Advocate* is equivalent to ‘defense lawyer’ but can also be translated as Comforter or Helper, and again, is found only in John’s Gospel. It probably doesn’t mean

anything, but I think it's interesting that John would choose a legalistic term to get his point across that God will send a defense attorney to testify on Jesus' behalf. Maybe he felt that that was a good way to get our attention.

Note that Jesus said, not 'If,' but 'When' the Spirit comes, and when the Spirit gets here, he's going to prove to the world that it's wrong about sin, righteousness, and judgement. This is sounding more and more like a legal brief. But it's the world's problem; it's not a problem for the Christ followers who are in the world but not of it.

In Acts, we see how the Holy Spirit brings unity; we also see how some refuse to be moved by the Spirit; we see how salvation is the present and continuing work of the Spirit; and we see how that salvation is universal and available to all who call on the name of the Lord. Salvation includes knowing that diversity and hospitality make us better and holier. And the more we value each other, the closer we become to God. This, I believe.

With the coming of the Holy Spirit, 'what was divided is mended.'² At his Table, Jesus teaches us forgiveness and fellowship. When we break bread together, we learn a little bit more about each other, and over time our diversity becomes our strength.

Jesus said, 'It is to your advantage that I go away,' because if he were physically present and visible, all we'd do is stare at him, waiting for him to do something cool. But because of his absence, we discover the Spirit moving through us, in us, and around us, calling us to put our faith and trust in Jesus, with the Spirit guiding us to the truth but not doing the work for us.

This fulfills what Jesus said earlier in chapter one, that 'you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8).

Our social environment is completely different than that of the apostles two thousand years ago. How does any society manage to live in unity in times of disagreement? Does the Holy Spirit also abide in those believers with whom we share very real and irreconcilable differences? And what do we do when the actions of the Spirit are different than what we expect them to be? Should we sneer or be amazed?

We run the risk of misinterpreting the workings of the Holy Spirit, and we might miss it completely if we trust only in ourselves. Last week, we caught a glimpse of this when the apostles elected Matthias to take Judas' place as the twelfth apostle. They prayed for God's guidance but lacked the patience to wait for it. The discernment process enables us to establish

guidelines for what community life should look like. It's not an easy or speedy process. It requires a commitment that the modern world sometimes will not give.

In the Tower of Babel story, the people had a *thirst* to build a city with its tower in the heavens; they had an *urge* to get there. This drive to go higher, to achieve, makes me think, and Scripture might back me up, that we also have a *thirst* for God in our lives. We seek out God even as God looks for us. If we believe that God was already here when we unlocked the doors this morning, then maybe God is also out in the world amongst the Parthians, Pamphylans, Cretans, and visitors from Rome.

We might prefer the Holy Spirit to come blowing in as a gentle on-shore breeze on a warm, sunny day. But Luke makes it clear that the Spirit came from heaven with a sound 'like the rush of a violent wind.' The Holy Spirit's power is not subtle. It's not fragile. The Spirit means business. Annie Dillard once suggested that on Sunday mornings 'we should all be wearing crash helmets...they should lash us to our pews...for the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.'³ God blows out the metaphorical windows in order to give us space to do the work we're called to do.

It may take time to figure out what that work really ought to be. It was a year ago last month that New North hosted a forum on the opioid crisis. That led us to Katherine House and a new outreach ministry that we have all helped support financially. We also offered to be a spiritual home for the women at the house. And when it became clear that getting into church on a Sunday was a logistical impossibility for them, we brought church to the House. It began as a germ of an idea tossed around at lunch one day and now it's a thing we feel compelled to do.

The Holy Spirit is leading us into new ministries that we'd never thought of before. Fasten your safety belts, God declares, for the Holy Spirit is being poured out upon us, and we will prophesy, we will see visions and dream dreams as the Spirit guides us toward the truth of what God requires of us.

Amen.

¹ Justo González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*, 2001, 37-38.

² Jana Childers.

³ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Harper & Row, 1982.