

Sermon: Spirit of Truth

New North Church

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

During this Eastertide season, we have been bouncing around the Book of Acts and hearing stories of how the Holy Spirit influenced one thing or another. Hardly a day goes by in the Book of Acts that the Holy Spirit is not involved in the life of the apostles, working in them, through them, or around them, so let's review what we have heard so far.

When the elders asked Peter 'what power or name' authorized him to heal people, he became filled with the Holy Spirit when he answered them (4:5-12). The Holy Spirit initiated both Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian court official (8:26-40) and Peter's visit with Cornelius (10:1-48), each of which concluded with conversions and baptisms. And the Holy Spirit, through prayer and the lucky dice, definitely had something to do with the election of Matthias as the new disciple (1:15-26).

The first three events took place in the story's future, after the day of Pentecost. Matthias' election occurred very soon after Jesus' ascension but *before* the day of Pentecost. With their numbers back up to twelve, they were now ready for whatever was going to happen next.

Before any of this, at the beginning of the book, while staying with the disciples in Jerusalem, Jesus ordered them not to leave town, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This', he said, 'is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit *not many days from now*' (Acts 1:4).

This explains why the disciples were so anxious to restore the Twelve with a special election: Jesus, before he ascended to heaven, had told them to expect to be baptized with the Holy Spirit some time soon, but he didn't say when. They knew they had to be ready.

And then, on the day of Pentecost, it happened.

Pentecost is the term used by Greek-speaking Jews for the Festival of Weeks, which is a one-day agricultural festival held fifty days after Passover. The festival traditionally celebrates

the first fruits of the harvest and is one of three feasts for which Jews from all nations come to Jerusalem to give thanks for God's goodness to their people.¹

Luke tells us that the disciples – which would be the Twelve plus the 120 or so other persons with them – ‘were all together in one place,’ namely, in the house.

In the city around them were ‘devout Jews from every nation under heaven,’ and Luke gives us a long list of countries for emphasis.

This is the scene into which the Spirit arrives, filling the disciples' house with a sound like the rush of a violent wind. And everybody heard it.

In this manner, the Holy Spirit filled the disciples and enabled them to speak in other languages so that all the people gathered from the other nations could understand them.

And those people were amazed and perplexed to be hearing about God's deeds of power in their own language from a bunch of Galileans, the country bumpkins of Judea. At the time, though, the word *Galilean* had a double meaning. The term *Christian* didn't yet exist, so in this context, a *Galilean* meant a follower of *the* Galilean, Jesus of Nazareth.

So, here is what Peter and the group learned on the day of Pentecost. First, Jesus' promise was fulfilled, and the disciples, now apostles, were filled with the Holy Spirit. Secondly, the Holy Spirit did not discriminate in choosing through whom it would act or by whom the message would be heard.

The prophet Joel said that God would pour out the Spirit upon all flesh, sons and daughters, young and old. For Joel, salvation is among us here and now and is not delayed until some future time; God will pour out the Spirit upon all people; there will be signs that this is so; and everyone who calls on the LORD shall be saved. It's no coincidence that Peter quotes Joel on the day of Pentecost.

Furthermore, there is not a single particular day we can set aside on the calendar where we say, *that's* the day when we will fill every hunger, diminish every fear, transform every hate, and end every war.² Instead, it is the work of the Spirit to help us make that day real right now, today and every day. There really is no time like the present.

Jesus said, when the Spirit of truth, the Advocate, comes, ‘he will guide you *along the way* of all truth.’

Luke gives us an example of how this can come about in the story about the Ethiopian court official who cannot understand a passage in Isaiah until he is guided by Philip who in turn is being guided and influenced by the Holy Spirit.

Father Raymond Brown, a Bible scholar at St. Mary's Seminary, wrote that, 'Guidance along the way of truth is guidance to the mystery of Jesus who is the truth' (John 14:6).³

John put his Gospel into words in the late first century. Ever since then, people have struggled with today's reading, especially verses 8-11, the ones about sin, justice, and judgement. Augustine avoided it altogether, saying it was too difficult. Thomas Aquinas cited the opinions of others but gave none of his own. Another commentator called them the most obscure verses in the Gospel.⁴ So, what am I thinking?

When Jesus said the Spirit 'will prove the world wrong' about sin and so on, does that mean the world will somehow be convinced of its own error? Back in chapter 14, Jesus said the world cannot receive the Spirit of truth because it neither sees him nor knows him.

Rejection of the truth is a deliberate action, so convincing the world might be a long shot.

Or maybe proving the world wrong means bringing 'the merciless light of truth to bear on guilt,' as Father Brown put it.⁵

Sometimes, the line between right and wrong is blurred out.

In my youth, I followed Formula 1 Grand Prix racing, along with other things, but got away from it about thirty years ago. Now I'm trying to catch up. The televised races are much improved and fun to watch, and, since the time zones for some races are half a world away, I can record a race to watch later, which we're doing right now.

A friend recently sent me a book about how, in this century, Formula 1 became the world's fastest growing sport. It's fascinating because I remember various eras and racers of the past, which happens to be my past, but the stuff going on behind the scenes is mostly new to me.

What really got my attention was how Formula 1 expanded into markets which happened to be in authoritarian host countries. This was done partly because the traditional markets were often so difficult to work with. There were rules and regulations to follow. There were too many different groups to deal with. Race promoters worked at their own pace, and so on.

In authoritarian countries, Bernie Ecclestone, the man who ran Formula 1, discovered that they just got things done. So, in the 1970s and 1980s, Formula 1 raced in Juan Peron's Argentina, apartheid South Africa, and Communist Hungary. Early in the 2000s, he added

China, Malaysia, and Turkey. But then Bernie found the real money in Persian Gulf States such as Saudia Arabia, one of the most repressive societies in the world.

In Saudia Arabia, you might end up in prison, tortured, dead, or all three if you are a dissident, a publicly vocal intellectual, or a human rights activist. Criticizing authority or advocating for political and rights reforms will put you in the literal crosshairs of the police. Forget about using social media for anything more than posting cat videos. Women’s rights, human rights, and migrant worker rights are all suppressed.⁶

Formula 1 visits these countries because they can pay the rights fees demanded by Formula 1. The races enable the host countries to put on a showcase event that puts them in a better light on a global stage. In Bernie’s world, the greatest sin is not wanting to pay enough.

Countries such as these cannot receive the Spirit of truth because it’s illegal. Your average dictator or autocrat or authoritarian head of state doesn’t want you to know the Spirit of truth, and they would laugh at me for saying as much.

But today, we’re celebrating the birth of the church.

Liturgically, the cycle that began on Ash Wednesday and continued through Lent, Holy Week, and Eastertide ends today on Pentecost. Symbolically, we have moved from ashes to fire.

Today, we rejoice at the sound of a violent wind rushing through the house, a day on which everything became clear for twelve apostles and their church.

We mark this day as the day we receive the power of God to prophesy, to see visions, to have dreams, and to move our congregation and our communities closer to ‘the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day’ (Acts 2:21).

Pentecost sums up the gospel in this way: Jesus Christ offers salvation to all, and the church exists to proclaim it.⁷ From now on, the Spirit of Truth, if we want it, will guide us through the world’s pitfalls and keep us focused on the mission to love God and neighbor.

Amen.

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¹ McDevitt, Jenny. “Between Text and Sermon: Acts 2:1-21.” *Interpretation* 66 (1), 2012: 70.

² *Ibid.*, 72-73.

³ Brown, Raymond E., *The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi)* (Anchor Bible 29A; New York: Doubleday 1970), 715.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 711.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/saudi-arabia>

⁷ Saldine, Kristin Emery. *Feasting on the Word*. Year B, Volume 3, 6. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.