

Acts 2 and Romans 8
The Spirit in You
June 9, 2019-Pentecost
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Pentecost is one of my favorite days. It's a day of color and celebration, with a little bit of mystery thrown in.

*Five years ago, on Pentecost, I was ordained. In the midst of finishing seminary, planning the ordination service, and preparing for important out of town guests, I didn't fully appreciate at the time how cool it was to be ordained on Pentecost. But now, each year, as we celebrate the birthday of the Church, I celebrate that God called me to serve the Church through ordained ministry.

*Today, especially, I celebrate that you called me to be your minister. I love serving you and serving with you. Your encouragement and love have meant the world to me as I have adjusted to life in Oklahoma. Thank you for trusting me and for allowing me to walk with you when life is fun and easy and when it's not. Every single day I am reminded that it is a privilege to be here and I love you.

I mentioned that I like Pentecost because there is a little bit of mystery thrown into the mix. The truth is, there is a whole lot about God and our faith that relies on our being comfortable with mystery. Some of us, I know, are more comfortable with that mystery than others. But for some reason, whenever we mention the Holy Spirit, mystery takes center stage, and with good reason, even the biblical writers didn't write about the Holy Spirit as if they had her all figured out, as if they understood the fullness of her work. Yet it has been clear all along that she was at work in our world and in the lives of God's people.

In the beginning, God's creative spirit blew over the chaos that contained the potential for everything that would soon come to be. Genesis 2 narrates the very breath of God bringing life to the first human being. Later, the Spirit appears in times of deep darkness and despair for God's people. During the Babylonian exile, while one group of God's people sits in exile in Babylon, and others gather the pieces of a shattered Israel, the prophet Isaiah promises them the coming of one on whom the Spirit would rest, a spirit of "wisdom and understanding," a spirit of "knowledge and fear of the Lord."

Many years went by and God's people were under the thumb of another oppressive empire. In the midst of the domination of the Roman Empire, the writer of Luke records John the Baptist's promise of one who would baptize by the Spirit, and then later in Acts 1, he writes, "...I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit..."

Paul, as Paul was prone to do, developed a very elaborate theology of the Holy Spirit. In his letter to the followers of Jesus in Rome, Paul wrote about the Spirit as the one who reminds us of our identity. He wrote, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ..."

The Spirit of God in us, tells us who we are and who our neighbors are. We all belong to God.

Paul continues in Romans, to talk about the Spirit as a mediator between human beings and God, "...the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the

heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

I could go on and on, recalling the adventures of the Holy Spirit in the lives of God’s people. The point is, the Bible does not speak with a single voice about the role and ways of the Holy Spirit. It is clear, where the Spirit of God is, there is mystery....and there is love.

Since the dawn of time, the Spirit of God has woven God’s people together, bringing life out of death and hope from despair, making what seemed impossible, possible. The Spirit does really big things and really little things and every kind of thing in between. Perhaps the most remarkable characteristic of the Spirit is that she resides with each of us and interacts with each one of us uniquely. I love that because it makes it impossible for us to do what we try to do-explain God, as if God is like us. The mystery of the Spirit makes it impossible for us to put God in our tiny little boxes. She makes it impossible for us to claim God is *only* like this or *only* like that. The Spirit, and specifically the story of the Spirit’s activity in Acts 2, insists that we acknowledge God’s love of diversity.

Jesus’ disciples in Jerusalem were gathered together to celebrate Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks. In the Jewish tradition, this festival has both historical and agricultural significance. Agriculturally, it commemorates the harvest and the presentation of the first fruits to the Temple. Historically, it celebrates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. On the mountain, God and the Jewish people stood together, in the same way a bride and groom stand together on their wedding day. God asked the people, “Do you accept the Torah?” And the Jewish people responded, “We will do. We will listen.”

*The gathering that day probably included someone reading the Torah out loud while the others listened. They might have recommitted

themselves to following the teachings found there. Suddenly, there was a loud, forceful wind that filled the whole house, something like fire appeared, and the Spirit made herself known to each one of them giving them the ability to speak in languages other than their own. And all of this happened at the same time. Can you imagine? As your ears are hearing, your eyes are seeing, your heart is feeling, and your mouth is speaking! So much going on that you can't possibly take it all in!

This rush of spirit initially enabled the disciples to share their gospel message to the people gathered in Jerusalem from many places. Unlike our relatively segregated churches today, Peter gave the first official sermon of the Church to a diverse audience. And clearly, he nailed it. Later in Acts 2, the story goes on to tell us that three thousand people came to be baptized as a result of hearing Peter's sermon. And from that point, the Church, powered by the Holy Spirit, was off and running and the fact that we are sitting here reminds us again that the Spirit will not be contained or confined.

Luther Seminary Preaching Professor, Karoline Lewis, says it this way, "So, maybe this is why we need Pentecost Sunday every year...and with texts that all say something different about the activity of the Holy Spirit in the world. Because there is a difference between noting inherent characteristics of the Spirit and standardizing her activity. There is a difference between believing in the promise of her activity and prescribing that activity. There is a difference between certainty of the Spirit's activity and fixing her activity so that her future is predicated on our predictions." In other words, the Holy Spirit will not be tamed or controlled by anyone.

*I saw the truth in this so many times this past week at camp with 74 junior high campers. Every time I go to camp, I am amazed all over again at how the Spirit works with these smart, kind, creative bundles of energy. To start with, I am certain the Spirit uses sugar to speak to

the hearts of the campers. This was demonstrated as each small group had the opportunity to plan worship. On Tuesday, the worship planners helped us understand what being in community is like by creating a gummy bear tree which produced gummy bears for each one of us during communion. Don't worry, we didn't have to dip them in grape juice, they chose chocolate syrup.

On Wednesday, we experienced the effects of unresolved conflict by coming forward for communion, taking a piece of a graham cracker and dipping it into an empty chalice. And on Thursday, there was a skit modeled off of the game show Family Feud. One family was quite well off, while the other struggled to pay for healthcare. Of course, the well-off family won, but in a wonderful twist, one of the winners gave her winnings, symbolized by a 100 Grand candy bar, to the losing family saying, "You played well, you deserve this." Communion that night was a 100 Grand bar dipped in marshmallow fluff.

Sugar isn't the only language the Spirit uses to speak to the campers. The Spirit uses go-carts and ziplines and a low ropes course to remind campers that they can do hard things and we are better together. The Spirit calls campers all together for meals and worship to show them the beauty of diversity and the value of community.

I love that at camp each young person has their own experience. What is just plain fun to one is the most meaningful part of camp to another. Ally told me her favorite part was conquering Goliath, the zip line. And Roslin said she loved hanging out on the patio, just being together, watching and listening to true community. Another camper this week told me she liked not having her cell phone all week. And one young man told me he liked the time with his small group because they listened to each other and didn't judge anyone's mistakes.

I told the campers Friday in the closing circle that our job, as followers of Jesus, is to always be including other people, to always be making the table bigger, pulling up another chair, noticing who is not at the table. I told them that “we,” the Church, will never be whole unless everyone is included, not that everyone has to believe the same thing, but that everyone must have a place. We know that’s hard for us. Human beings have a tendency to seek sameness. My experience, though, is that the Spirit shows up when we’re risking our comfort by reaching out to the ones who are different, not when we keep people a safe distance from us. In the Pentecost story, the disciples became aware of the Spirit that is present in each of us and were able to talk to people who were different from them and miraculously they spoke to them in ways they could understand. That’s what we are called to do, to tell people, in a way they can understand, that God’s love is for them too.

*Mysteriously, sometimes that way involves gummy bears dipped in chocolate. Sometimes it’s putting away our phones and listening to each other or it’s singing songs we don’t like in worship or changing the way we do things at a Board meeting. Sometimes it’s apologizing when we have behaved badly or even giving away a sack lunch to a stranger. Whatever it is, “the Church” is called to speak love because it is love (in any language) that will change the world. Amen.