

## “Out of the Believer’s Heart...”

Acts 2:1-6; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 7:37-39

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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Pentecost

Pentecost. One of the great festivals in the life of the church, celebrating the coming of the Holy Spirit. I intended to encourage all of you to wear something red, to symbolize those “flaming tongues of fire,” to help us celebrate that day. Go find something red right now if you want!

I want to go over the background to this story in some detail. Most of you probably know a lot of this already, but there’s always the possibility that someone out there is hearing this story for the very first time. Pentecost was an ancient Jewish festival. It predates Christianity by many centuries. The Jewish name was *Shavuot*, which means “Weeks”, or “Feast of Weeks.” It is celebrated annually seven weeks after Passover – a “week” of weeks. It would always fall somewhere between the middle of May and the middle of June. To this day, religious Jews *still* celebrate *Shavuot*. It was an agricultural festival, celebrating the conclusion of the annual wheat harvest. It also commemorated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai, an event which would have occurred about fifty days after the very first Passover. The Old Testament books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy all talk about this festival.

In the century or two before Jesus, more and more Jews were living in Greek cities, and speaking Greek in their daily lives. So these Greek-speaking Jews came up with a Greek name for the festival: *Pentecoste*, which means “fiftieth,” that is, the 50<sup>th</sup> day after Passover. You can find mentions of the *Pentecoste* festival in some of the Jewish literature of that period, like the book of Tobit and the Second Book of Maccabees. So, *before Jesus*, there were already two different names for the same festival: *Shavuot* and *Pentecoste*. And it had *nothing to do* with flames of fire and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

There were three festivals every year in which the faithful Jews would typically make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. One was Passover. One was *Sukkot*, a fall harvest festival, also called “the feast of Tabernacles” or “the feast of Booths.” The third was *Shavuot*, or *Pentecoste*. This is why, when we read the story in Acts 2, Jerusalem is filled to the brim with Jews from every corner of the Roman Empire: “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arab.” *These were Jews who had come* – like they came every year – to celebrate *Shavuot*. *Pentecoste*. It was a pilgrimage festival – so they came, from far and wide.

Jesus’ little band of followers were also in Jerusalem. They had been hanging out in Jerusalem ever since his death and resurrection. His death happened right around Passover; his resurrection happened just after Passover; his ascension took place forty days later – about a week and a half before *Shavuot*, *Pentecoste*. He had told them, right before he ascended, that they “would receive power”

when the Holy Spirit came upon them, but they didn't know when that would occur. They probably *never* anticipated that it would happen right smack dab in the middle of the next Jewish festival!

So, the book of Acts tells us, "when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place." We're talking about the original twelve apostles, minus Judas Iscariot, plus the new apostle Matthias, who had just been appointed to replace Judas, plus certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as Jesus' younger half-siblings (the children that Mary and Joseph had after Jesus), plus a variety of other followers. There were, we are told in Acts 1, about 120 believers in total at that point. These people were "all together in one place" when the festival of *Shavuot* came around seven weeks after the resurrection. We think that they gathered in the very same "upper room" that the disciples had been in with Jesus for the Last Supper, a large room big enough to hold all of them.

"And suddenly," we read in Acts, "from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them." In Christian artistic depictions of this event, you can see little tiny flames appearing over the heads of each of the disciples. "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." The Jews in the streets outside hear the commotion coming from the house. The Christian disciples are suddenly empowered with the ability to speak in other languages – so that all the Jews in the streets were able to hear those words *in their own native languages*. This was astounding to *everybody* who was there. Peter stands up before the assembled crowd and gives a big speech – the very first Christian sermon – with the result that *three thousand Jews* became believers in Jesus, were baptized, and began worshiping Jesus!

And so the church was born, on the day of Pentecost, at the Jewish festival of *Shavuot*, in the city of Jerusalem, right about seven weeks after Christ's resurrection. Obviously the Christians no longer could all fit in the room they had been gathering in. From that point on they had to gather in smaller clusters, meeting in different places – separate *congregations* ("gatherings"), but still *one church*.

What the Spirit did to those believers on that day of Pentecost long ago, the Spirit *still* does for us now. Followers of Jesus are given the gift of the Holy Spirit. But the gift of the Holy Spirit manifests itself in different ways. Some people, like those disciples, are given the gift of *speaking in tongues*. Some people, like Peter, are given the gift of *evangelism*. But there are a *multitude* of gifts that the Spirit gives. This is Paul's point, in the passage from 1 Corinthians: "there are *varieties* of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are *varieties* of *services*, but the same Lord; and there are *varieties* of *activities*, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." He names a bunch of such gifts: wisdom, knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, the discernment of spirits, speaking in tongues, the interpretation of tongues. These are just examples; other gifts are named in other parts of the New Testament. We've used a resource here that helps people identify *thirty* different gifts that the Spirit gives. "All these," says Paul, "are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses." Lord knows, we Christians need a *lot* of different gifts in order to be effective in Christ's service and witness. Where would we be, without evangelists? Where would we be, without wisdom and knowledge? Where would we be, without the gift of healing? We are all – *every single person* who places their faith and trust in Christ – we are *all* given gifts by the Holy Spirit that we can use – that we *need* to use – for the betterment of the church and the world we are living in.

Here's the problem. Two problems, really. First – some believers don't seem to realize that this

actually applies to *them*. When faith emerges in your heart, the gifts of the Holy Spirit follow. Sometimes people think, “Oh, I don’t have any gifts; the Holy Spirit didn’t give anything to me.” Wrong! You’ve got gifts. You might not have *discovered* them yet; you might not be *aware* of them; maybe you’ve never *utilized* them, but they *are* there. There are resources you can use to help you figure out what *your* gifts are, and what you can *do* with them for the betterment of the church and the world. Sometimes you may find that you have some gifts that surprise you. The last time we took people through that material, quite a number of you discovered some gifts that were, shall we say, a bit *surprising*. Maybe even *uncomfortable*. We had said we would provide some additional help to those people this year; unfortunately, that process has been delayed by the coronavirus, but it is our intent to get back to it. You’ve *all* got gifts from the Holy Spirit; let’s help you figure out what to *do* with them.

Here’s the second problem. One of the unfortunate things that has happened over time is that Christianity has fractured into all these different denominations and traditions. Sometimes that is because of theological reasons; sometimes it’s because of issues going on in society ... and *sometimes* it’s because different traditions – intentionally or not – tend to put more emphasis on *some* gifts and less emphasis on others. The result is that we now have *some* portions of Christianity that place a great emphasis on *evangelism* and *faith* ... and *some* portions of Christianity that place a great emphasis on *supernatural healings* and *speaking in tongues* ... and *some* portions of Christianity that place a great emphasis on *knowledge* and *wisdom*. In very broad strokes, I’ve just described the *evangelical* churches, the *Pentecostal* churches, and the *mainline* churches. What happens is that people who have certain gifts tend to gravitate towards the traditions that are *most like them*, with the result that we end up with churches that are very different from one another. We Presbyterians, for example, tend to be very *knowledgeable*, but when it comes to evangelism, we’re basically clueless! This is not the vision of the New Testament, and it’s one of the reasons why denominations like ours have been steadily shrinking for the last three generations. The ideal church is *balanced*; there’s a home for *everybody*, for *all* the different spiritual gifts; all the different gifts are given the proper amount of *respect*. We ran into a stumbling block a year or so ago when we discovered that some of you may have some gifts in areas like *healing* and *miracles* and even *tongues* – and we don’t really have anybody here in the walls of *this* church with lots of experience in those areas who can effectively mentor people who are just discovering those gifts within themselves. That’s a problem we need to figure out how to solve!

Let me close this morning with a quick word about the passage from John’s gospel. Jesus was at one of the festivals in Jerusalem – *Sukkot*, the feast of the Tabernacles – and he invites people to come to him. He quotes a verse that says “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.” He’s talking about the Holy Spirit, about the *gifts* that the Holy Spirit gives. His followers hadn’t received the Holy Spirit yet; this story takes place before his death and resurrection; but he knows that it will come. “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water,” he says. The Holy Spirit comes *into* us when we place our trust in Christ – and then what flows *out* from us are the *gifts* that the Holy Spirit invites us to offer to the church and the world. We breathe *in* the Holy Spirit; we breathe *out* God’s love, in a multitude of different ways. From our heart stream rivers of living water. This is what Pentecost does for us – it makes us *conduits* of God’s life-giving water, flowing out to bathe the world in the love of God.

So come, my friends. Let your Spirit-given gifts *flow* through you ... out into the world. *You* – *we* – all have the privilege, the opportunity, to *bless* the church and the world with your God-given gifts.

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