

## “For the Common Good”

Acts 2:1-21 • Numbers 11:24-30 • Psalm 104:24-34, 35b • 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13 • John 7:37-39

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Pentecost

Today is, of course, the day of Pentecost, that special day in the church year that comes around faithfully seven weeks after Easter. The word “Pentecost” originally comes from a Greek word which simply means “fiftieth,” referring – for us Christians – to the fiftieth day after Easter. If you call Easter day #1 and just start counting, then yesterday would have been day #49, and today would be day #50. But the festival of Pentecost actually pre-dates Easter by a long time; it was originally a Jewish festival long before it was a Christian one. So when you read in Acts 2 the words “when the day of Pentecost had come,” it’s talking about the *Jewish* festival of Pentecost, which was originally a festival celebrating the springtime harvest of wheat. It was one of three great Jewish pilgrimage festivals; Jews would come to Jerusalem from all around the Roman world to celebrate. In the Old Testament it was called “the Feast of Weeks,” because it was celebrated exactly seven *weeks* after Passover. Pentecost is still celebrated by Jews today; nowadays they refer to it by the Hebrew name Shavuot, which simply means “Weeks.” Christians celebrate Pentecost not because of wheat harvest, but because of what happened at *one particular* festival of Pentecost, approximately seven weeks after Jesus’s death and resurrection.

The story is familiar to most of you, but let me just repeat a few key points. The followers of Jesus are now completely bereft of their leader. After his resurrection, Jesus had spent some time with his followers over a period of 40 days. But ten days before Pentecost, his principal followers watched him ascend into heaven from the Mount of Olives. He was going to take his seat in the eternal realm with God. So for the next ten days, the followers of Jesus – who numbered only about 120 people in total – had been trying to figure out how to carry on without him. They had appointed a disciple named Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot, so there were once again twelve apostles. Jesus had instructed them to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” and to teach them everything that Jesus had commanded them. But that was surely a very daunting task. Where in the world would they begin, and how would they do it?

Well, thankfully, God had a plan. The festival of Pentecost arrives; Jerusalem is bursting at the seams with Jewish visitors from all over the known world, and the followers of Jesus are celebrating privately on their own. They don’t quite fit in with their Jewish brethren any longer. Luke tells us “they were all together in one place;” there’s a long tradition that says they were actually in the same “upper room” where they had celebrated the Last Supper with Jesus, seven weeks earlier. Luke tells us what happened next: “And suddenly 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. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” Now remember, they are indoors. But all

the Jews who were *outside* this building, on the city streets around it, could hear what was going on *inside* the building. At that time, Greek was the common language of the Empire, but at the Pentecost festival, there were *tons* of people in Jerusalem who had grown up speaking other languages, their own *native* languages that they had learned in their hometowns. And suddenly, these mostly Jewish followers of Jesus who had gathered in that upper room were given the ability to speak in other languages, other *real* languages, languages that the people out there on the streets recognized. They are bewildered: “How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” So what then happens is the followers of Jesus, inside the building, come out and interact with the people outside the building, and Peter gives a great big speech, the most famous sermon in the history of the church, in which he explains that what is happening is the fulfillment of prophecy, and that God has made Jesus both Lord and Messiah. Many of the crowd are persuaded by Peter’s words and the miraculous event that they themselves had witnessed and experienced, and *three thousand Jews* become Christians on that day. *Three thousand!* The Church of Jesus Christ just multiplied by a factor of 25!

This was not the *first* time that the Holy Spirit had manifested its power. There are a number of times when the Holy Spirit shows up in the pages of the Old Testament. One of them is the story we heard earlier from the book of Numbers. This takes place some twelve centuries earlier, after the Israelites have left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea, after they have received the Ten Commandments and other laws at Mount Sinai, but before they have arrived in the Promised Land, during their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness. During that period of time they worshiped God using a portable temple they had constructed, called the “tabernacle,” which is described in detail in the book of Exodus. This is a rendering of what it might have looked like; there is a central structure called the “tent of meeting” which contained the holy shrine, and in front there is a large altar, which is where the priests offered the sacrifices. Here’s another representation, a full-scale model that was constructed at a park in Israel, although the materials they used aren’t the materials the Bible mentions. Still, you get the idea. Something like this was used by the Israelites as their temple for many decades. In the story, Moses gathers together 70 elders among the people of Israel in the tabernacle, around the tent of meeting. The Lord comes down in a cloud and speaks to Moses, and “took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders, and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied.” That spirit is what we Christians would call the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit rested upon those 70 elders, just as the Holy Spirit rested upon the disciples of Jesus on the day of Pentecost, twelve centuries later. The elders of Israel were given the ability to utter prophetic oracles, just as the disciples of Jesus were given the ability to speak languages they did not previously know. In both cases, the Holy Spirit *gave gifts*.

There’s an interesting twist in this story. There were two men, two elders among the Israelites, who had not gone to the tabernacle, but remained in the camp where the Israelites slept. Their names were Eldad and Medad. For some reason they didn’t join the 70 elders at the tent of meeting. But “the spirit rested on them” too, and they started uttering prophetic oracles *in the camp*. This doesn’t sit well with everybody. A young man runs to tell Moses. Joshua, Moses’s assistant, tells Moses to stop them. Joshua would have made a good Presbyterian, he wanted things done decently and in order, and what was happening was definitely not – in his opinion – decent or in order! But Moses discerns that this is an authentic manifestation of the Holy Spirit. He chastises Joshua, then exclaims, “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” In other words – *let the Spirit blow where it will*. If it’s God’s will that those two men prophesy, then so be it!

So that’s just one out of a number of stories in the Old Testament where the Holy Spirit shows up. It had been active in human affairs periodically *before* Jesus arrived on the scene. And, of course, it has continued to be active since that important day of Pentecost as well. The apostle Paul talks

about the activity of the Holy Spirit in a famous passage in his first letter to the church in Corinth. Now, so far today we've talked about the Holy Spirit giving people the ability to speak in other known languages, and we've talked about the Holy Spirit giving people the ability to utter prophetic oracles. That list of gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to people is about to get expanded quite a bit. Paul says: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of powerful deeds, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses." So there are different gifts. The Holy Spirit makes some people wise. The Holy Spirit gives other people knowledge. The Holy Spirit makes some people especially faithful. The Holy Spirit enables some people to heal other people, some people to do powerful deeds, some people to utter prophetic oracles, some people to discern between different kinds of spirits, some people the ability to speak in other languages, and so on. This is just a partial list; there are several lists like this in the New Testament, plus some other references as well; if you compile it all together, you get about thirty different gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to people. The key point here is that the Holy Spirit gives *different* gifts to *different* people. Some people get one gift; other people get another. We do not get to choose our gift; God gives as God chooses. Our job is to figure out *which* gift, or gifts, *God has given us*. And then *use* that gift – not to benefit ourselves, but rather "for the common good." "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good*."

Here is where this comes into play in our life today. *God has given you one or more special gifts through the Holy Spirit*. Yes, *you!* Every Christian gets *some* kind of special gift. We are all different; we are all unique; *and we all have something to offer*. In the church of Jesus Christ, *everybody* has a gift, and everybody needs to be *using* that gift in some way that benefits other people. This is why we say that all members of the church are ministers *in* the church. We all have some form of ministry to which we are called. It could be singing in the choir, or serving in the kitchen, or helping with church finances, or ministering to the poor or needy, or leading a Bible study, or sharing your faith with others, or caring for the homebound and the ill – the list is endless. There are all sorts of ways people can use their Spirit-given gifts for the common good in the church, and many of you are doing just that, in one or more ways. I try to maintain a list of who's doing what around here. It's a long list!

But some church members seem to have missed the memo here. There are some who don't seem to be doing *anything* in the church for the common good. Some people appear to just want to be on the receiving end. Others don't seem to want to be in church at all. Granted, if you're dealing with a major medical issue, obviously you get a pass. We all go through seasons of life when we just *can't* give, when we *can't* be of much service to other people. That's perfectly understandable. But if you're able-bodied, if you're part of this community of faith, *you need to be doing something*. That's part of what it means to belong to the church of Jesus Christ. Find something that *feels meaningful* to you. If you need suggestions, well, just start asking around. There are *plenty* of things you could do. The Worship and Music Committee would want me to remind you that we're *always* in need of people to greet and help serve communion! There are an *endless array* of ways you can use the gifts the Holy Spirit has given you, for the common good of your fellow Christians here in this community of faith.

So the Holy Spirit gives gifts. *Amazing* gifts. If you're already putting them to good use, *great!* Fantastic! *Thank you very much!* But if you're not ... well, there's no time like the present to start...!

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