

May 27, 2007

Acts 2:1-21

Sermon: "The Spirit Has Staying Power"

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Text: "...*I will pour out my spirit, and they shall prophesy.*"

One of the great advantages of being away from your home church is that it gives you opportunity to worship in other places, and to see what's happening there. I've been in some churches that were so alive you could feel the energy from the moment you walked in the door. And I've been in other churches that were so dead that I couldn't wait for the preacher to pronounce the final blessing so I could skedaddle out of there.

The difference is the Holy Spirit. I gotta tell you folks, the difference is the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is that driving presence, that powerful force that constantly stirs up and motivates the church. Without the Spirit, church is a dull, lifeless routine, a meaningless "going-through-the paces" kind of thing that not only fails to inspire, but becomes (according to the Bible) "a stench in the nostrils of God" (Isa. 65:5).

Without the Holy Spirit the barriers that divide us and the deadness that surrounds us are insurmountable. You and I are without hope if we are without the Spirit. Yet, with the Spirit there is always the promise of new life – always the hope of new life.

On this Pentecost Sunday, as on every Pentecost Sunday in the history of the church, we celebrate the triumph – the abiding triumph – of the Holy Spirit. Over all of our differences, even the differences of language, and culture, and national allegiance – differences of class, and race, and gender – over all these differences, the Spirit triumphs and abides. Over every obstacle you can remember, or name, or even imagine, the Holy Spirit abides. The Spirit has staying power.

You see this so dramatically in Acts 2. There we see gathered many different, competing languages and nationalities. And, friends, what divides us more these days than matters of language and nationality? Immigrants, legal or otherwise; and multi-lingual instructions printed on just about anything – drive us cuckoo, and remind us of what a melting pot our nation is. Probably a better

metaphor is a salad bowl, a tossed salad, because we never really blend all together, do we?

But on that Pentecost Day, many, many years ago, another bowl of tossed salad was being stirred up by the Holy Spirit's power, and all those differences were overcome. Language, race, religion – you name it – all were taken care of. The Holy Spirit has staying power.

Let's be clear on this: There is such a thing as "a human spirit." You and I speak of the human spirit as that power within us. We say that the human spirit is "indomitable." When the Olympic runner stumbled in the track meet, then recovered, got up, picked up the baton and finished the race, we think, "That runner has great spirit." And what we're talking about is the human spirit.

When William Faulkner got the Nobel Prize for Literature, he gave a speech praising the human spirit. He said, "I believe in man. I believe that man will triumph, despite everything." Faulkner was praising the staying power of the human spirit.

And yet, the human spirit can also be an adversary of God. The same human spirit that can take a deep breath, in the midst of adversity, and clench its fist and move forward is also the spirit that clenches its fist in rage at God, defying him and rebelling against him. Isn't it ironic that the same spirit that brings the greatest in human achievements is also that which brings us the greatest grief?

This morning we're going to look at the Holy Spirit. The Bible tries to tell us, I believe, that life is a constant struggle between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit. Sometimes they're at odds, duking it out with each other. Sometimes they dance with each other, and encourage each other, and even resist each other. Yet always, praise God, the Holy Spirit prevails.

Pentecost was a Jewish festival that took place not long after the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus had been raised from the dead. The disciples had seen him. They talked with him, touched him, were satisfied that he was not just a ghost. But then he was gone from them, because he told them so – that he had to go away.

What now? What should they do? He told them to go to Jerusalem and just wait. Wait until he sent the Holy Spirit to be with them. So they waited. And they wondered: Was Easter just something that happened to Jesus, but not to them? Was it all up to them now to their indomitable human spirits plus a little blood, sweat and tears? How were they going to find the strength and the determination to carry out Jesus' commands to save the world?

Many of them began to doubt and to lose hope. Fear and suspicion began to set in. But on Pentecost Day there was something dramatic – something supernatural – the rush of a mighty wind, and fire, and tongues of fire – and the Holy Spirit came in all its lasting power. The church was born. The once dispirited disciples got filled with the Holy Spirit, and they got what the human spirit could not give.

And who made up this church, this fledgling movement of the Spirit? Who were they? Jews, of course. They were the only ones who had gathered on Pentecost Day. Pentecost was a Jewish

festival. And the promises of God are clearly promises just for Israel.

But not long after this story of Holy Spirit power there were other stories, too. The apostle Peter has a story, a Holy Spirit story, about a vision. In that vision a great sheet is lowered before him, and on that sheet he sees animals of all descriptions: Some clean, some unclean, according to Jewish Law. “Don’t call anything I create unclean,” the voice tells Peter.

You see, Peter came to see that that vision was not just about unclean food, but about unclean people. Gentiles. Non-Jews. And so he met up with Cornelius, the Gentile, and he baptized him and made him clean. And what this says is that the church – that early church filled with Jews only – could have remained just one little sect of Judaism, a gathering for disgruntled, dispirited Israelites, and nothing more. And eventually it would have died off, just as all the other sects of Judaism died off, except for the Pharisees.

But no – the promise of God was sent even to the outsiders, to the Gentiles. To the rest of the world. The Holy Spirit has staying power.

Fifteen hundred years later, the church was in trouble once again. There was widespread corruption, abuse of power by church leaders. There was lethargy and laziness among the people of God. The church had become wealthy, comfortable, complacent. Was Pentecost just a hoax, a distant memory and nothing more? What will God do to fix his church in these troubled times, people wondered? So, God sent Erasmus in Holland, and Martin Luther in Germany, and John Calvin in Switzerland, and – you know the rest. The Holy Spirit shook the church to its roots, and took hold of spirit-filled believers once again, and the Protestant Reformation blazed across Europe.

Fast-forward, if you will, a few centuries to colonial America. The church had once again become complacent. It was content to play at the game of religion, substituting a “dry-as-bones” morality for true, heartfelt faith. The sum of religion was to

conform outwardly to rules and regulations, while inwardly people yearned for spiritual nourishment. Jonathan Edwards implored his people to turn from their sins and experience the true freedom of the Holy Spirit. George Whitfield called people to a radical understanding of spiritual re-birth through the ‘ole-timey’ gospel religion. And John Wesley spoke of a heart “strangely warmed” by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Great Awakening in America reached out to 80% of the population of the colonies, and America hasn’t been the same ever since.

Spiritual awakenings in American history have been responsible not only for renewing the church at critical points in its history, but also for reforming our culture. The abolition of slavery, women’s suffrage, child labor reform, alcohol and drug rehabilitation programs – all these and many more programs of reform came out of Holy Spirit-led movements in the American church over the last century and a half. Again, despite all the odds, the Holy Spirit has prevailed. The Spirit has staying power!

And perhaps this has no greater testimony than in the role of women in the church. Women, who were once significant leaders in the early church, if we can believe the New Testament – women were pushed back and pushed aside over time as the church fell back into the patterns and habits of the surrounding culture. And what a shame! For centuries, the gifts and contributions of women for leadership in the church have been ignored or repudiated, and that has been to the loss of the church.

Finally, in the last century, the church has awakened to the tragedy of its past. The gifts of women have been recognized and affirmed. As many of us believe, this has been a true working of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has prevailed. The Spirit has staying power.

This is how someone has described it in poetry:

*Everywhere that life breaks forth and comes into being,  
everywhere that new life as it were seethes and  
bubbles,  
and even, in the form of hope,  
everywhere that life is violently devastated,  
throttled, gagged and slain –  
wherever true life exists, there the*

*Spirit of God is at work.*

**Because** of this, we do not lose hope. Because of **this**, we do not lose hope. Because of this, we **do** not lose hope. The Holy Spirit keeps us on our toes, expectant, eager, sometimes even nervous! The same Holy Spirit that gave birth to the church continues to prod and cajole and beckon and satisfy. And just when we thought we got all settled down, nice and comfortable with things as they are, our pews picked out and seating arrangements fixed – there comes the rush of a mighty wind, or the still small voice, a breath of fresh air, tongues of fire, and . . . the Holy Spirit takes charge. The Spirit has staying power.