

Sunday June 5, 2022

## Lesson 1: Receiving the Spirit's Gifts

Scripture: Acts 2: 1-4, 17-21, 33, 38-39

### Context:

Today begins a new quarter in the Adult Bible Studies curriculum as we begin the summer season. This summer will focus on how God transforms us as the Spirit works in our lives. The first unit focuses on the fruit of the Spirit and how life in the Spirit brings about unity and appreciation for one another.

The lesson for this morning comes from the book of Acts, a book known as the history of the early church. At the beginning of Acts, there is the formation of the church at Pentecost, a story to which the faith community assigns authority and to which it returns again and again as a guide for life.<sup>1</sup> In the liturgical calendar, the reading of this text comes at the conclusion of the fifty days of Easter, a time where we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord from Easter Sunday. As we reread the Pentecost story, we recount a day when the Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus and they experienced something they had not experienced before.

The scene of the scriptures is vivid and so colorful. There is a fierce wind to fill a house, individual flames resting on each one of them, and people speaking languages they had never spoken before. As we read the story, we resemble the crowd in our multiple interpretations of what is taking place in such a strange and wonderful event.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes we see it as a means to connect Resurrection to the life of the church. Others see it as the Tower of Babel being reversed as now all will be able to speak to what God is doing in their midst. Others link the story of Pentecost to the giving of the law on Mount Sinai with a new law being given at Pentecost.<sup>3</sup> And for others, there is inspiration to the church today to get back to the zeal to proclaim the answer to what we must do to be saved and go out into the world.

The response to this event is a sermon given by Peter to address what is taking place. One of the tools Peter uses in his preaching is referencing the teachings of the prophets who have come before him. Just as the Spirit inspired prophets like Joel, the Spirit now inspires God's prophetic restoration of a prophetic people.<sup>4</sup> The response is now the people will be baptized and they will be brought into the community of faith.

Peter's closing end with words of what will now happen as they gather together. The crowd, formed from the ranks of a "crooked generation" will be the recipients of a Spirit-empowered preaching to go forth and be in the world.<sup>5</sup> God will be the one to continue to be at

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<sup>1</sup> Willimon, William H. "Acts," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 37.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 39

work and draw people into the church.

### **Application**

In many churches, Pentecost becomes a Sunday where the church fills to the brim with red. Pastors invite their congregants to wear red, there might be red banners hung, and the rare red stole is added to the preacher's vestments. For some congregations it's a joy (and for others an act of sacrificial devotion; just ask my congregation as our town rival has a trademark on red). Whatever it looks like in your context, hopefully it is a day of exultant worship where God is praised, and you can feel the Spirit moving and stirring both you and your community of faith.

The Spirit comes into major focus in today's passage, a theme consistent with the book of Acts. Episcopal priest and writer Barbara Brown Taylor once described the book of Acts as the gospel of the Holy Spirit as we learn of what the good news did through the Holy Spirit by performing artificial resuscitation on a room full of well-intentioned bumblers and turning them into a force that changed the history of the world.<sup>6</sup> God was of course the author and the one responsible for what happened that day. It was the work of the Spirit to come in and transform people to be the church and spread the gospel.

Perhaps one of the most powerful components of the story is there was no intentional plan laid out by the disciples for this to be a timeline. It just happened as the Spirit came in and ignited the people. They felt the nudge and then things took off from there.

As a planner, I read this text and part of me shivers. I like the idea of having five-year plans and things with a timeline. Toolkits and lists are my jam and make me feel "secure." Yet today's text does not contain a formula, a planned-out list for the church's development, and guarantees about the future. There is of course the promise of the Holy Spirit and even then, not all the answers come with what the gift of the Holy Spirit will bring to the church.

Yet that is the point of Pentecost. There are no prescribed plans, no exit strategies, and everything flows together in a mad rush. God is at work and will show up in all sorts of places among all sorts of people. God doesn't like to listen to our ideas necessarily nor the timetables we like to have in place. Once the Spirit starts going, there can be no stop to it as hard as we may try.

In different seasons of my life, I have thought I have had the right answers to everything. I get something stuck in my head whether it's an opinion, what a scripture means, or even what I know about another person. And then lo and behold, the Spirit comes along, and I have an experience where my opinion is challenged. Or I read a scripture a year later and I notice a word I had never seen before. Just a week ago I laughed with a friend for how a long time I thought they were serious and had no sense of humor, only to find after years of friendship, they were one of the funniest and laid-back people I know. The Holy Spirit, if we are open to it, can teach us things and give us experiences to both challenge and joyfully surprise us.

As the church celebrates Pentecost this upcoming Sunday, I hope we too realize the Spirit is not done with any of us. The Spirit still has things for each of us individually and for the church communally. In a world which focuses on individual autonomy and always having control, what would happen if we released our desire to have everything our way and instead lean into what the Spirit might have in store for all of us as disciples of Jesus Christ?

How have you felt the Holy Spirit transforming you? Why do you think celebrating

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<sup>6</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. "The Gospel of the Holy Spirit," *Home By Another Way* (Boston, MA: Cowley Publications, 1999), 145.

Pentecost in the church is important? What are ways you've seen the Spirit change lives and take people in different directions? How can we practice leaning into the Spirit and seeing new ways of the world? When was a time you felt the Spirit leading you to see something or someone differently?

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