

Sunday May 31, 2020

Lesson 14: The Holy Spirit Inspires Jesus' Followers

Scripture: Acts 2: 1-21

Context:

Our final lesson for this season goes to the book of Acts and the story of Pentecost. To conclude the focus on grace, the lesson focuses on how the Holy Spirit transforms the world and the evidence of such on Pentecost. As we've looked at the other figures of the godhead of the trinity, God the Father and God the Son, examining God the Holy Spirit helps us understand the intersection of grace with humanity.

Often we hear of Pentecost being understood as the birthday of the church and there is much truth in that. Yet it is more accurate to speak of Easter as the birthday of even of Pentecost.¹ When reading the Pentecost story, we would do well to remember how the author of Acts is attributed to the same writer as the Gospel of Luke. Never meaning necessarily for the Gospel of Luke to be separated, the book of Acts is a continuation of the Easter story as the resurrection goes to the ascension and then the Pentecost story.² Originally, the celebration of Easter, Ascension Day, and Pentecost were all linked close together and thus one learned more about the power of the story and how these events were a cascade for one another.

The story of Pentecost begins with the disciples being together and then suddenly a wind creating a stir among them and then tongues of fire coming upon them. This mysterious event is given a name: it is the power of the Holy Spirit. Yet the real gift comes as the Holy Spirit enables the assembly to speak and the gift of proclamation reveals people speaking in different languages and even causes crowds to gather to watch.³ People begin to think those speaking are drunk as they hear all their native tongues being spoken so eloquently from complete strangers!

The first one to address the phenomenon is Peter, who gives a speech. Here a pattern begins for the book of Acts; the church is confronted by a crowd, and then an apostle speaks interpreting the gospel through a sermon.⁴ Peter speaks of the Kingdom of God at hand and how the age of fulfillment is here. In Peter's speech, we are listening to a Jew speak to fellow Jews, helping to link Jesus to the scriptures and give people a better understanding of who he is for them.⁵ Thus, Peter uses excerpts from the book of Joel to speak in the language of the Jews and give them a new understanding of the text. The Spirit emboldens him to speak and proclaim the good news of Jesus to a mesmerized

¹ William Willimon, "Acts," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2010), 28.

² *Ibid.*, 28.

³ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

crowd. Pentecost is all about the Spirit showing up and moving both individuals and communities to new heights where they've never been before.

Application

Every time I read the Pentecost story I marvel at all the languages spoken and the scene itself. There are mysterious winds, flaming tongues, and people accused of being drunk. It reads as a college fraternity party of epic proportions.

And it is a party that rivals one that the University of Alabama or Birmingham-Southern might show out. At this party, the culprit is the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit comes the whole atmosphere changes and the gathering truly becomes "lit," a word of wisdom I learned from one of my graduating high school seniors.

As the Holy Spirit comes to the meeting place of these disciples, people change. Those who thought they had only one language can now speak multiple languages. Peter, a bumbling disciple of Jesus who always seemed to get it wrong, suddenly becomes the first Billy Graham of the day. He is eloquent and polished as he tells the crowds of who Jesus is and what Jesus means for the world. The apostles go from looking like a ragtag group of knuckleheads to apostles, those chosen by God to go and witness to the ends of the earth.

You can see why Willimon and other scholars contend we need a more explicit link between Easter, the Ascension, and Pentecost. The day of Pentecost was when the church came into the midst of God's story in a whole new way. The Holy Spirit came to give them the sustenance they needed to participate and tell God's story. This day of celebration gives the church its identity and the narrative, which needs to be told again and again.

One of the facets of grace is how it mysteriously works in our lives and continues to nudge at our hearts and souls. We are sometimes aware of it and at other times we are surprised at what grace may be doing to us. At times we can tell God is at work on us and other times we realize something about ourselves or others that may not be apparent to the obvious eye.

The Pentecost story is about people being transformed and God working through them in ways maybe they knew or ways where even they were surprised. We know Peter would speak his mind, but one has to wonder if he knew he would be so captivating and eloquent as he spoke to the crowds. The same goes for those members of the crowd who thought they were just monolingual only to discover they knew multiple tongues. Maybe they had it in them, and they just didn't know it.

That's the Holy Spirit for you though. The Holy Spirit comes into our lives and speaks through or uses us even when we didn't know what was going on. The Holy Spirit doesn't fit in nice, neat formulas or boxes humans are so good at constructing. The Holy Spirit shows up in all sorts of places and works through all sorts of different people.

The Pentecost story reveals to us the power of grace and how the Holy Spirit breaks through all different barriers and constructions. Just as no one has a monopoly on God the Father or God the Son, no one controls God the Spirit and tells the Spirit what to do and what to accomplish. The Holy Spirit shows up and reminds humanity we only thought we knew how to throw a good party.

How have you felt the Holy Spirit at work in your life? We often talk about grace and the death of Jesus. How does the Holy Spirit play a role in the gift of grace from

God? What is your favorite part of the Pentecost story and how does it play a role in your spiritual walk?

Rev. E. Hunter Pugh
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge
PO Box 71
Brantley, AL 36009