

“The Gift of the Holy Spirit”
John 20:19-23; John 14:18-20, 25-29
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine
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Today is Pentecost Sunday, the day we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. The color for Pentecost is red, and that's why we have the red and orange logo on the front cover of the bulletin. The well-known story of Pentecost is told in the Book of Acts. When the disciples were all gathered together in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Pentecost, “a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the house where the disciples were staying. And they saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire lighting on top of each one of them.” And we are told “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak” (Acts 2:1-4). The red streamers the kids brought in during the prelude help to remind us of the flames of fire that symbolize the gift of the Holy Spirit. Doris Baucom, who still faithfully changes our liturgical colors each month, reminded me this past week that this is the only Sunday in the whole year that we get to see this beautiful red fabric. Occasionally at an ordination service we may use red, but Pentecost is indeed the red letter day for Christians.

But here's some Bible Trivia for you - did you know that while the Pentecost story in Acts is the most familiar one about the gift of the Holy Spirit, it is not the only one in the New Testament? The Gospel of John has its own story that connects the giving of the Holy Spirit not to the Day of Pentecost but rather to Easter Sunday. Though the red flames of fire told in Acts chapter 2 make for an exciting and colorful story, the lesson we have today from John's Gospel is just as important. Let us turn now to God's Word, as we look at two passages from John. You may follow along in your bulletin insert.

First, the story in John 20: it is Sunday, the first Easter evening. Let us listen now for God's Word:

It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven.”

And from John chapter 14, we recall Jesus' closing words to his disciples. The night before he is arrested and crucified, he spends time addressing their fears. Jesus says to them:

I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you

will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur you may believe.

We all live in a world where there's lots of opportunities to be fearful. Whether it's the tragic shootings that continue to break the hearts of so many in our country, or the increase of environmental disasters like floods and fires, all consequences of the earth heating up - there are ample and good reasons for us to be fearful. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that we are not in control of things and it can be so easy to be swamped by our fears.

Though we may be tempted to put the people in the Bible on a pedestal and consider them to be all "holier than thou" saints, the thing that brings me comfort is that they seem to be just like you and me. They are accustomed to living with fears. Take the disciples for example on Easter evening. As you may remember from our study of John's Gospel, Mary Magdalene had already witnessed the risen Lord at the tomb that morning, but now the story continues that evening with the disciples locked behind closed doors. Though Mary has seen the Risen Lord and shared that news with them, they are hiding behind locked doors - perhaps they are afraid that the religious authorities may seek to arrest them, too. Or worse, maybe they will suffer the same fate as Jesus their leader and be killed.

All of these seem like reasonable fears to me, and if I was in their shoes I could see myself reacting in a similar way. You see, the disciples have known for some time that Jesus was going to leave them, and in the verses we read from chapter 14, Jesus has been doing his best to prepare them for his departure. He told them, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." He promised them he would send them his peace, and that he would not leave them without a Helper. But during those hours on that first Easter, locked behind the doors, the disciples begin to internalize their fears. They begin to believe their fears - that they have been left alone, that they have become like orphans - that it was only a matter of time before the authorities would come after them. They believed with Jesus gone they had no help at all. This is the story that they told themselves, and when you hear it long enough you begin to believe it. And in doing so they begin to move from people who have fears to people who are defined by their fears. They become trapped in their story of fear and thus they become afraid. You see, the disciples are not superhumans to be put on a pedestal at all. They are as human as you and me. And even on that first Easter, when they have heard the good news of Jesus' victory over death, they remained stuck in their fears. But the story doesn't end there!

Did you know when angels - God's messengers - when they show up in the Bible, do you know what the first thing they usually say? It's "Do not be afraid!" Remember an angel tells Joseph, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." When Gabriel tells Mary she is having a baby, he says, "Don't be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God." When Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus' tomb that morning and finds it empty, the angels say to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" You see, when God comes into our lives, it is often in the times of fear and loss and chaos. Though we might think we have to get our house in order before God comes to visit, that's not the way it works. No, God comes to us right where we are, right in the midst of our fears.

And yes, that's what we see happening on that first Easter evening. Despite the fears of the disciples and doors that they have locked, Jesus comes and stands among his friends. "Peace be with you" he says, and then he shows them the wounds in his hands and his side. The disciples see the Lord and are immediately filled with joy. I know when I am filled with fear and then my fears are relieved, there is a sense of deep relief and joy. Indeed, the Lord has not left them - he has made good on his word and he has returned bringing peace. ***But the peace doesn't come just by the words Jesus speaks - no, the peace comes by the Spirit he brings!*** In the gifting of the Holy Spirit, Jesus makes good on his promises. "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you..." The Holy Spirit is a personal presence that God gives the disciples while Jesus is away. Bible scholar Frances Taylor Gench describes the work of the Holy Spirit this way: "The Spirit is present... as a *comforter* in times of trouble or sorrow; as a *teacher* bringing to remembrance all that Jesus said and did, and revealing the mind of Christ in new situations; and also an *advocate*, standing beside believers when they have to defend their faith or speak truth to those who hold power, empowering unwavering witness" (Gench, [Encounters With Jesus: Studies in the Gospel of John](#), p.136).

While the story of Pentecost in Acts is a very dramatic event with loud sounds and tongues of fire, here in John's Gospel it is very quiet - in fact, you can say it's as quiet as a breath! While most translations simply say Jesus breathed on them, telling them "Receive the Holy Spirit," the verb used here has more of a sense of breathing life into someone. It's the same verb used in Genesis chapter 2 when God breathes a living spirit into human beings, the story of creation. Now with the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have a new creation. The old life ruled by death and fear is gone - a new life marked by abundance and joy is here! The amazing good news of Pentecost is that the very same breath of God that resided in Jesus now resides in us!

If I was one of the disciples in that upper room that evening, having my fears relieved and then receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, I'd think this would be a time to have a party, a celebration, a Holy Reunion with our Risen Lord! But that's not what happens. Rather, the gift of the Spirit is not an experience the disciples are to keep for themselves. No, the gift of the Spirit is for equipping the disciples for mission as Jesus prepares to return to God (Gench, p. 137). "As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." If you let these words of Jesus sink in for a moment, you may hear how radical of a thing this is. Just as God sent Jesus into the world to demonstrate God's abundant love - God's overflowing, grace upon grace, extravagant love - the type of love that is stronger even than death - just as God sent

Jesus to show that love to the whole world, so we too are sent by Jesus to do the same thing. With the Spirit of God within us, the very same Spirit that was in Jesus, the Holy Spirit who is our Helper and Teacher and Comforter - we are sent into the world to share the Good News of God's love.

This week I met with some of our Awakening Spiritual Imagination team. As we prepare to conclude our study on how our congregation can reclaim its calling in the world, we did an exercise. We thought about a few questions: **Who are we as a congregation? What is our mission? And who is our neighbor?** I encourage you to think about these as well, and what you may discover is that each question is related to the other. Yes, we are God's people - young and old, and everything in between. Since 1893 - that's almost 130 years - we have gathered together in Spruce Pine to worship God with all our hearts and minds - we have sought to nurture and strengthen each other and to love the community as best we can. And who are our neighbors? They are the ones down the street who may not have a church home. They are also those in remote parts of this county, folks who may or not have adequate housing or transportation. Since we are part of a connectional Presbyterian denomination, our neighbors are also our siblings in Guatemala and in Malawi, two countries where our presbytery has long standing relationships. Through our words and actions we are called to show the love of God to those in need, and our job is to discern what it is God is calling us to do. Notice I said it's our job together- not my job as your pastor, or the Awakening Spiritual Imagination team - no, it's our job together to listen to who God is calling us to be. Through prayer and conversation and reflection I believe we can discern who God is calling us to be in this time and this place. The Session has set up three teams to stimulate such discussion - a mission team, a property enhancement team, and one for hospitality and welcome. Speak to me if you want to get involved in this work, and stay tuned for more information about upcoming meetings.

On this day of Pentecost we are reminded that we are not alone in trying to live out our mission. Ever since our baptism into Christ we have been equipped with God's very own Spirit - a Spirit not of fear, but of boldness - a Spirit not of timidity, but of courage. ***Because of the power of God's Spirit that has been poured into our hearts, Jesus assures us that we will not only do the works that he does, but we will actually do even greater works!*** And if you don't believe he said that, just look it up (John 14.12)! With the confidence of the children of God we can live into times of uncertainty, times of transition, even times of fear. And as we trust in God's Spirit at work within and among us, we can become who God is calling us to be.

Thanks be to God. Amen.