

## “Pentecost Sunday”

*Numbers 11:24-30; Acts 2:1-13*

May 28, 2023

James Henry White, in his book, *“Rethinking the Church”* notes an interesting story. Years ago, the Swiss dominated watch making. They had for generations. By 1968, the Swiss made 65 percent of all watches sold in the world. By 1980, however, they had laid off thousands of watch-makers and controlled less than 10 percent of the world market. Why? They’d lost sight of their actual mission – to make the world’s best watches. You see, the Swiss had refused to consider a past development—the—the Quartz movement and use it in their watches. Ironically, the quartz movement was invented by a Swiss inventor years earlier. Seiko, on the other hand, embraced it and quickly became the leader in the watch industry. The lesson of the Swiss watchmakers is profound. Their future was destroyed by their inability to consider their real mission – making great watches and how that might need to happen in the present day.

That’s a story that the church of Jesus Christ in America needs desperately to hear. After all, mainline denominations are plummeting in membership faster than a lead zeppelin falls to earth. Even where there is apparent growth, like at some megachurches, most of the new faces come not from conversions but rather from pew-swapping, moving from one church to another. But it doesn’t have to be that way, not really. In a very real way, we are like those Swiss watchmakers. We’ve got our quartz-movement but we discount it, believing it not to be what the world wants or needs from us.

Today is the day upon which the church celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit. The birth of the church, really. And I believe, quite rightly, that within our reading this morning, we can re-discover our power. A power given to the church by God to change the world. Hear now the Word of our Lord from the second chapter of the Book of Acts of the Apostles: *“When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.’ And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others mocking said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’”*

Y’all, I’ll never forget one of my first classes in seminary. My first actual class in seminary was a real barn-burner, let me tell you. It was “Presbyterian Polity.” That’s right, a full semester before I’d start studying the Bible or theology, I spent a long summer learning all about our Book of Order. The professor Dr. Richard Boyce, current President of Union Presbyterian Seminary, made the material interesting, engaging even. But one thing he said in the course of that class troubled me then and continues to do so to this very day. Dr. Boyce told us that he almost never preached from the Book of Acts. His reason – he didn’t want congregants to compare themselves to those earliest apostles and disciples. In short, he feared people would study what the early church was able to accomplish and judge their own efforts to be entirely lacking. His comment stuck with me. Made me ask some difficult questions. Am I, are we, to believe that somehow this same Holy Spirit isn’t working in a similar fashion today? Was there something about temporal proximity to Jesus’ life, death and resurrection which somehow made the Holy Spirit MORE powerful than He is today? To quote Paul from a different topic, “BY NO MEANS!”

The same Spirit is moving in our time and place just as powerfully as He was way back in those earliest days of the church. Jesus, as we know from the Scriptures, alerts the apostles of the Holy Spirit’s impending arrival in Chapter 1 of Acts, *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”* Did you hear that? Power. The Holy Spirit brings power. To us in our Christian witness, to the church as it sets about its work of building the Kingdom of God here on Earth as best we’re able.

This isn’t the only time we hear of the Holy Spirit’s coming by Jesus. We also heard Jesus talk about the Spirit’s arrival in the Gospel of John, prior to His crucifixion. John 14:16 – *“And I will ask the Father, and he*

*will give you another Helper, to be with you forever.*” This “Helper,” this Holy Spirit comes into the church bringing amazing strength. The very power of God, actually. And, it should be noted, it’s a directed. Force.

Now what do I mean by that? Well, consider if you spilled some gasoline on the ground and then lit it. A whoosh of flames would go up but, very quickly, it would burn up and out with little change created. On the other hand, what if that gasoline was used correctly by a car’s engine? Well then, it could propel a family of four all the way to Atlanta from here. That’s quite a change compared to a flash in the pan, so to speak.

That’s what I mean by directed power. The Holy Spirit comes to propel the church into performing it’s work in the world. Our reading from Acts this morning gives us no less than three examples of how the Holy Spirit empowers the Body of Christ on earth.

To begin with, the Holy Spirit’s power helps overcome our fears. Have you ever had to sit in a doctor’s waiting room when you were awaiting a visit with your physician to go over some medical test results? Even if it’s just a simple blood test, as you sit there, where does your mind go? Most people. Myself included, see fears bubble up within them. Worries you never knew you had come rushing to the forefront of your mind as you sit there and wait. Fear raises its ugly head and we sit there with our minds spinning. There just is something about being forced to wait which draws out our fears. Fears of the future, fears of our own shortcomings and failings.

Tom Petty nailed it didn’t he? “The Waiting is the Hardest Part,” right? Well, that’s exactly what those first Apostles and Disciples were doing there in that room. They were there waiting because Jesus told them to wait. At the end of the Gospel of Luke, after the Resurrection we read in chapter 24, verses 45-49: *“Then He [Jesus] opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of My Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.’”*

Did you hear that? Clothed with power. I’m sure they felt far less than clothed with power as they waited there in that room in a city that had seen their leader executed. They were sure to have known that other people, claiming to be the Messiah had come and died at the Roman’s hands. The followers of those, would-be-messiahs all were rounded up and, themselves, crucified. So, I can imagine that there would’ve been a palpable sense of fear. The first thing the Holy Spirit does is take this group of frightened people and relieve their fears. They leave the room and go out into the city. And they don’t remain silent, timid little creatures cowering in the corners. I know that because the crowds there in Jerusalem, seeing and hearing them remark, basically, these guys are drunk.

Why would they say that? Well, they say alcohol is a “social lubricant” and perhaps for good reason. Have you ever noticed when a really quiet person has a drink or two at a party how they become absolute chatterboxes. Alcohol decreases our inhibitions. As is said, “in vino, veritas” that is, with wine, truth” and it basically points to how inebriated people often speak the truth without concerns over the consequences. Here, of course, the disciples were not drunk, but their inhibitions were removed. Their fears were taken away. Gone was that catch in the throat that stays evangelical words.

Remember, speaking as boldly and as loudly about Jesus as the Son of God as Peter does just a few verses later would’ve put them all back in the crosshairs, so to speak. Remember, the scribes and Pharisees conspired to have Jesus killed precisely because He claimed to be the Son of God. Further, the Romans were not exactly the most tolerant of people who claimed that there was anything more powerful than the Emperor and the apparatus of state he wielded. That was one of the primary reasons they were in such bitter opposition with the Jews. So now, this group of fishermen and tax collectors were out in the streets proclaiming God’s ultimate authority revealed in and through Jesus Christ, a man the Romans had already killed.

The Spirit gave them the power to overcome fears. The Spirit is still sharing that energy with Christ’s disciples. I’ve seen this happen, absolutely. Without question.

I know this man, Brian. Brian and I met doing a Kairos walk together. Now for those of you who don’t know, Kairos is a prison ministry. Groups of believers go into prisons to host a three-day spiritual retreat which focuses more of fellowship than lecturing. We sit at tables, eat cookies and drink punch primarily. But still, it’s all done inside the walls of a prison.

Brian, well, as we met getting ready for this Walk, he was antsy. Wasn’t entirely sure if he was cut out for this

particular ministry. In fact, he confided later on, he'd come up with a dozen excuses why he couldn't go. As the days got closer to our Walk, the waiting, fear almost led him to pull out. But he stayed. He was at my table. I got to watch this guy be completely cowed by his surroundings, to being affable and confident with the inmates. In fact, the Holy Spirit gave him so much power to overcome his fears, that Brian has been a fixture with Kairos ever since, even being the leader of a Walk himself.

But that's not the only power the Spirit brings. Now believe it or not, one of my favorite movies of all-time is that gem from the 1980's Top Gun. Ask my kids, instead of saying no, I frequently reply to their requests with, "negative Ghost rider." For those of you who don't know that movie, it is the tale of a troubled F-14 pilot, Maverick, as he seeks to become the best airman in the entire Navy. Throughout the film, there is one particular pilot, the Iceman played by Val Kilmer, who is frequently at odds with Maverick. The two battle in the air in training exercises and, in one of the cheesiest scenes from all of the 1980's, the two square off in a beach-volleyball match. As the movie reaches its climax though, these two former foes overcome their differences and unite and form an unstoppable team. Hollywood loves that formula. The one where the former enemies unite in order to vanquish the bad guys

Now, believe it or not, our Scripture text today contains an element of that plot-line too. As our Scripture begins today, the Spirit descends upon a gathered community. As the reading from Acts tells us, this is quite a diverse group, one filled with people who were bound to have had great differences of opinion on a host of matters. There were tax collectors, fishermen, rich men, poor men. That room was filled with people who ordinarily would never mix. Then, suddenly, with a thundering whoosh, the Spirit comes into Jerusalem as the fulfillment of Christ's promise. This diverse, and perhaps contentious group of people, is drawn together. It is unified.

What's interesting to note is how far short of that we actually fall in respects to our unity within the church. As we know, the church is split apart into more denominational bodies than I'd hardly want to waste the time counting. We, of course, are Presbyterians. Down the road are some Baptists, over across the way there are Methodists and Lutherans and Seventh-Day Adventists. And that's just denominations.

Today, the church is further torn asunder by political and philosophical outlooks. In fact, a really interesting fact came across in the 2010 Pew Survey on Religion and American Life. This is an exhaustive survey taken every ten years that seeks to discern American's current beliefs and practices in the realm of religion. What's so terribly depressing is the knowledge that the majority of people selecting churches do so primarily along political lines. Instead of seeking the strongest movement of the Holy Spirit within them, most people set about looking for a church which agrees with them politically. But within any church that the Holy Spirit is truly working, political differences are cast aside for the sake of unity in purpose.

When I got to the last church I served, what really amazed me was how diverse the political opinions were. There were dyed-in-the-wool Republicans worshipping with true-Blue Democrats. As I became more joined to them through Facebook, I'd see these tremendous political arguments line up my newsfeed. In fact, sometimes things seemed so bitter that I was just sure people would leave the church. They didn't. In fact, there these people would be, together in a Sunday School classroom. Together in worship. Together whenever the church went out into the world to do shine Jesus' light within a world darkened by human sin. They remained together. I don't think I've seen the Holy Spirit operate more clearly in that power to overcome political differences in order to do the work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The unity of the church is so absolutely essential because our mission, make no mistake about it, is to turn this world upside down. To take a world torn asunder by human sin and bring it together under the loving shepherd-ship of our Savior, Jesus Christ. This power to overcome our fears, this power to be unified is given to us so that we can go out into the world and evangelize to the very ends of the Earth.

Do you remember what Jesus told the disciples in the Gospel of Luke. He gave them their mission, really. Jesus said – *“Repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of My Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”*

Our power is contingent upon our work to proclaim Christ to the nations. Paul, in Romans 10 writes this – *“How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’ But they*

*have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?' So, faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.'"*

Peter, in Acts 2, is about to do just that. Proclaim Christ. In fact, following our reading this morning, Peter preaches a sermon to the gathered people telling them about how God acted to redeem humanity through the sending of His only Son Jesus Christ who suffered and died. Without fear and surrounded by his fellow believers, Peter declared the Gospel so that the people could hear the Word of Christ. Listen to the crowd's response from Acts 2:27 – *"Now when they heard this [Peter's sermon] they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "'Brothers, what shall we do?'"* Here's Peter's reply. *"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit..."* Acts 2 goes on to tell us, *"And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this crooked generation.' So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls."*

There's our quartz movement. There's the mission, the change, that's so vitally necessary in this world. You see, the church of Jesus Christ right now, is lost. In the process of trying to figure out how to be all things to all people, we've lost sight of the Holy Spirit's power and what the Spirit directs us to do.

All these churches out there trying to build a better mousetrap, trying to come up with the "next big thing" to lead people into the ranks of their rapidly deteriorating memberships and few are succeeding. And the reason why they're failing is manifest. While they're out there hoping for salvation of the church through big screens, kids programming, sermon series, light-up signs etcetera they've failed to do the one thing to which we're all directed. Proclaim the Gospel.

So too has the pastorate has failed us. Many of my own friends and colleagues promote Marxist social theory far more than they proclaim the Gospel. Calling sinners to repentance is the last thing they'd ever consider doing. Is it any wonder the church in America languishes?

So, let's, that is, you and I, let's reclaim our heritage. Our birthright within the church, if you will. Let's allow ourselves to be moved by the Holy Spirit. Let's allow the Spirit to release us from our fears. Let's allow the Holy Spirit to unify us. And then, let's be led by the Holy Spirit out into the world to do our one and only mission: *'GO THEREFORE and make disciples of all the Nations.'*

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

## Scriptures and Quotes

### **Introduction**

#### **Acts 2:1-13**

“When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.”

#### **Acts 1:8**

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

#### **John 14:16**

“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever,”

#### **Luke 24:45-49**

“Then he [Jesus] opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

### **Power of Unity**

#### **Galatians 3:28**

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

### **Power of Proclamation**

#### **Romans 10**

“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”

#### **Acts 2:27ff**

“Now when they heard this [Peter’s sermon] they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Here’s Peter’s reply.

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit...

Acts 2 goes on to tell us, “And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.”