

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

March 3, 2019

Last Sunday after Epiphany

Acts 2:1-21

Filled with the Spirit

(First in a Six-Part Series: *Adventuring Through Acts*)

Today we begin our sermon series: *Adventuring Through Acts*. Over the next six Sundays, taking us up to Holy Week, Gary and I will work through the “Greatest Hits” of this book of the Bible, which tells of the very beginning of the church. It was written by Luke - of the Gospel of Luke - so in a way it's like his second volume. In the Gospel he tells us all about Jesus birth, life, death, resurrection. And in volume 2, Acts, we get what happens next.

We've picked six important passages / sections to take us on a quick trip through these early weeks, months, and years of the church.

We begin with chapter 2, and the reading, which usually comes seven weeks after Easter, on what we call Pentecost. After Jesus was raised from the dead, he spent 40 days or so in his resurrected body appearing to hundreds of people. Then he ascended to heaven, leaving Earth, and ten days later this happened...

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, 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 Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*‘In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.*

*Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.*

*And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,*

*blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'* (Acts 2:1-21)

The church has traditionally called this the story of Pentecost - and we have a whole Sunday given to it. Churches - including ours - typically have Confirmation on this day. (June 9 for us this year.)

But Pentecost is not a uniquely Christian celebration. In Jesus day, Pentecost was a great Jewish festival, 50 days after Passover, celebrating the harvest of the winter grain. It was a large and joyous feast. And so Jerusalem was filled with happy pilgrims praising God and enjoying each other's company for the Feast of the Harvest.

It was 9 o'clock, Pentecost morning, when suddenly something happened, which so changed those who were there that neither they nor the world would ever be the same. In fact, all of church history flows out of 9 o'clock that morning.

And it was so powerful that Luke struggles with his words to explain the dramatic effect of what happened. They heard something "like a mighty wind." They saw something "like tongues of fire." Notice the word "like." What happened can barely be described!

Which is often the case when the Holy Spirit is involved. Because the Holy Spirit is not some "other worldly," disconnected, distant energy swirling around in the stratosphere. No. The Holy Spirit is how God gets things done in the world.

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word for spirit is *ruah*...and we first find it in Genesis chapter 1: the *ruah* of God swept over the waters... *ruah* means breath and wind as well as spirit. (one word for all three)

Remember also that God **spoke** creation into being, "and God said, 'let there be light,' and there was light." And as you know, there is no speech without breath - the two are inseparably intertwined.

The same is true in the Greek of the New Testament, where the word for spirit is *pneuma*, from which we get pneumatic - wind or breath or air. Just as God breathes life into Adam, so his Holy Spirit breathes life into the church.

AND THEY WERE ALL FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT. (2:4)

Before this, outbreaks of God's power and the filling of the Holy Spirit are individual and sporadic...now and again, here and there. But now, the power and presence of the Holy spirit is for EVERYONE, everyone gathered there that morning, and everyone who would come after seeking Jesus.

Again and again, through the book of Acts, Luke describes the work of the Holy Spirit...changing verbs often. The Holy Spirit *falls upon, comes upon, is received, pours forth*, and, of course, *fills* the church and its people.

And, as we move through these next six weeks, we'll see over and over how the Holy Spirit is the personal presence of Almighty God Himself, not some unnamed force, or THE force, or some impersonal energy, or the universe.

Being filled with the Holy Spirit is being in relationship with God, and being in relationship with those around us with the eyes and heart of God. The Holy Spirit is what takes a random gathering of people and makes us into the church - into a people of deep and abiding friendships who put each other's needs ahead of their own, who sacrifice and give to each other in ways never dreamed of before. (We'll hear more about this next week - specifically what the first church was really like.)

God Himself, comes to us in the Holy Spirit to grace and love us into His people. He doesn't just gather us together, but specifically gathers people to him.

Think back with me to when Jesus was being accused and convicted before his crucifixion. One of the significant moments in that story was when Jesus was in before Pilate being questioned, Peter was out in the courtyard and someone spotted him and recognized him as one of Jesus' disciples. Three times Peter denied his association with Jesus to save his skin (just as Jesus had predicted he would).

Now, six weeks later, Peter is the main preacher in our reading today, and throughout the entire book of Acts, proclaiming with confidence and clarity that Jesus Christ is risen and Lord of all.

That's the kind of gathering the Holy Spirit does - gathering us to Him in confidence of faith. Taking us from denial and disbelief to faith and hope.

I have a children's sermon I've done a couple times on the topic of the Holy Spirit. First, I take all the little holes that I've punched out of paper with a hole punch (and I do it with lots of different colors). I say that these little pieces of paper are like people who live all over the world and I throw them all over the carpet. The people are scattered - they look different and they speak different languages, as well as living all over the place. Then I bring out a vacuum and say that the Holy Spirit is like a vacuum. It gathers us all up into God, no matter what we look like or where we live. We all belong to God, and the vacuum/Holy Spirit is what brings us together.

The church is a community gathered by the Holy Spirit. We are a people under the power of and sustained by the presence of God's very Spirit.

And even more than that, it says it right here in our Bibles, **WE ARE ALL FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT.** (2:4)

The disciples prayed for the Holy Spirit, because Jesus had promised it to them, and it came - literally blowing them away and changing the world.

And we are the result of that first Pentecost. You, by virtue of being gathered here in this church, are the changed world that was begun 1,986 years ago when the church was born. Our banner says 1826, but I suppose it could also say 33.

What a blessing and privilege it is to be the people of God. And how fitting that our little church's stated purpose is *Sharing Christ ~ Changing Lives*, because THAT is what the Holy Spirit looks like and does.

Amen.