"The Gift of the Spirit"
Acts 2:1-47, selected
May 11, 2008
Pentecost Sunday

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Introduction to the 2nd lesson

Imagine a world in which cultures are colliding … where new modes of communication and transportation bring masses of strangers together … where religions once determined by geography are now crossing the world … . Imagine a world where change is constant and resistance -- even hostility -- to change is bubbling just below the surface. This is the world of the 1st century, connected by Roman roads and international commerce and an empire stretching across dozens of nations. This is the world of Jesus and all his Jewish followers. This is the world of Pentecost.

Like Passover – which celebrated liberation from slavery -- the festival of Pentecost, fifty days later, celebrated the gift of the Ten Commandments and the Torah in the wilderness of Sinai. It was a festival to remember roots, to celebrate the essential things that brought them together in faith, and to give thanks for God's gift of calling them to be his people. And it was a giant homecoming party for many Jewish people far-flung across the Empire. Crowds of devout Jews gathered: Aramaic speaking Jews living in Jerusalem, Greek speaking Jews from Hellenistic cities, Coptic speaking Jews from Egypt, Farsi speaking Jews who lived in Persia. And there were Jews by choice, too – the converts – and others called "God-fearers" who followed Judaism but hadn't taken the final step of circumcision. Seekers, we would call them today – people on the path of following God.

It is perhaps those seekers for whom the books of Luke and Acts were written. This two-volume set of Luke-Acts are both addressed to a certain "Theophilus," literally, "God-lover," who may well represent countless 1st century converts to Judaism … converts who are versed in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, but who are confused about who Jesus was, and why some Jews are following him, but others aren't, and whether he could really be the promised one, the Messiah.

How does the writer of Luke and Acts address the questions of "Theophilus" and seekers of God everywhere? We're all familiar with the gospel of Luke, where the life of Jesus is carefully laid out by referring to prophecies in the Old Testament: his birth in Bethlehem, his baptism by the Spirit, his call to disciples to follow him, his healing and teaching the Torah, and ultimately the controversies that lead to his death and resurrection. But then, unique in the New Testament, the gospel writer does something no one else tried: to chronicle the life of the early church *in exact parallel* to the life of Jesus: the birth of the church in Jerusalem, the church's baptism with the Holy Spirit, the church's call of disciples to follow in the Way of Jesus, the church's work of healing and teaching the Torah, and the church's controversies that lead to the martyrdom of many. The life of Jesus and the life of the church, they unfold in the same exact way. And this is where it all began.

We shared in the opening verses of this story, dramatically led by the choir. Now we hear, as Paul Harvey would say, "the rest of the story" – what happened that day in response to that cataclysmic event, when the heavens opened and the Spirit alighted on the first disciples. Listen to the word of God as the apostle Peter addresses the astonished crowd, bewildered by the fact that they have heard the word of God in their own tongue.

<u>Scripture lesson (Acts 2:22-47, selected)</u>
"Fellow Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders and signs that God did through him among you – this man, handed over according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the Law of Moses. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for Jesus to be held in its power. …

Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received the promise of the Holy Spirit, Jesus has poured out this that you both see and hear. …Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made Jesus both Lord and Messiah."

Now when the crowd heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For this promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord God calls to him.”

So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

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Presbyterians, you may know, are fondly called “the frozen chosen” – having inherited the stiff upper lip from our English side, frugality from our Scots side, practicality from our Dutch Calvinist side, deliberate intellectualism from our founder, John Calvin, who was a university-trained lawyer and scholar.

So Presbyterians, to put it bluntly, have not known what to do with Pentecost – the celebration of the gifts of the Spirit – the marking of the day when the winds blew and tongues were spoken and crowds fervently fell on their knees in the first mass conversion. It is, shall we say, not our style. And yet … and yet, Pentecost may well be the ideal holy day for our generation of post-moderns –for those of us who are here for a dutiful homecoming, as Mother’s Day often is … for those of us who are here full of curiosity, because we’ve heard exciting things are happening in this church … for those of us who are seekers – those new to the faith or fallen away from the inherited faith of our childhood … for all of us, in short, who are here in much the same way devout Jews had gathered in Jerusalem in that ancient time of globalization, when everything was possible, and nothing was certain but somewhere called home.

This is what Pentecost offers us: in the confusing, contentious, and ever-shifting landscape of our world, Pentecost offers us the chance that God’s Spirit is still blowing anew, on each of us in our journey, and on all of us as Christ’s church. In eerily similar ways, Pentecost offers us the same gift as one of our

most treasured festivals in this congregation: the Baptism of our Lord –when we renew our own baptismal vows. We rehearse the way God has indelibly marked us as his own … the way we are claimed as God's beloved children alongside Christ, his Son. It has become a cherished tradition to many of us here: a time at the opening of the year to remember our core identity, and the noble calling we are blessed to bear as Christ's family.

And what is Pentecost, if not that same reclaiming of our baptism in Christ? The writer of Luke and Acts makes it abundantly clear: the baptism of Christ in the Jordan and the baptism of the disciples at Pentecost are *the same experience:* God's claim on us … God's calling for our lives … God's sending us to be his people in the world.

We make it so much more complicated than it needs to be. But our Pentecost calling has always been simply this: We go out into the world and share the good news of God's love in a way that *other people understand.* Not by reciting creeds at people, but by pointing out where we see God at work … Not by beating strangers over the head with a Bible, but, just as the apostle Peter did, by connecting what God has done in the past with what God is doing today … not by forcing our beliefs on our friends, but by saying out loud what we trust with our hearts: that in the midst of all the changes swirling around us, there really is a God at work in the world. A God not just for some but for all.

Now, I don't know about you, but I see a world that is starving for these gifts. The gifts of God's love that don't conform to a color or a country or a language. The gifts of God's love that are reaching out to Myanmar, and North Chicago, to the streets of Beirut and the kitchen of a friend. The gifts of God's love that are seeking to bring understanding among strangers and peace among enemies and wholeness within broken, hurting people. And I marvel that we have been tapped for this sacred work.

And when we are tired, or spent, or in doubt, the second thing we do is this: We come back in from the world to support each other with the Spirit's nurture. And like the church has done since that first Pentecost, we come back together week after week after week after week – with new friends in Christ being added

to the old – and we reach out for the strength and support we need to keep going. "They devoted themselves to the teachings, to the breaking of bread and the prayers," and they found encouragement in each other … as we find encouragement in one another still.

The baptism of Jesus … our baptism as a church at Pentecost: they are blessings of the same cloth. Well, maybe not *exactly* the same – there *is* one difference between Jesus' baptism by the Spirit in the Jordan and the church's baptism at Pentecost: Jesus was baptized alone. The church – we were all baptized together. I can't be sure … I can't be sure, but I suspect that was no accident. It was no accident that we are meant to be in this together. Amen.