

**“Pentecost: The Holy Spirit & the Church”**  
**Acts 2**  
**May 23, 2021**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

It is Pentecost Sunday, and this morning we will hear the story of Pentecost from Acts chapter two, and consider what it means for us as the Church.

You have all of Acts chapter two before you, in the bulletin, but we will abridge Peter’s sermon a bit, as it is not our focus this morning.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

<sup>2:1</sup> When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. <sup>4</sup> And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

<sup>5</sup> Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. <sup>6</sup> And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. <sup>7</sup> And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, <sup>11</sup> both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” <sup>12</sup> And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” <sup>13</sup> But others mocking said, “They are filled with new wine.”

<sup>14</sup> But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. <sup>15</sup> For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. <sup>16</sup> But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup> “And in the last days it shall be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams;

[...]

<sup>22</sup> “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— <sup>23</sup> this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. <sup>24</sup> God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

[...]

<sup>32</sup> This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. <sup>33</sup> Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. <sup>34</sup> For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

“The Lord said to my Lord,  
“Sit at my right hand,  
<sup>35</sup> until I make your enemies your footstool.”

<sup>36</sup> Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

<sup>37</sup> Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” <sup>38</sup> And Peter said to them, “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. <sup>39</sup> For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” <sup>40</sup> And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” <sup>41</sup> So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

<sup>42</sup> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> And all who believed were together and had all things in common. <sup>45</sup> And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray ...

## **Pentecost & the Church Community**

We come to Pentecost at an interesting time. With the last fifteen months behind us, many Christians in America are in the process of rethinking how they view the Church.

For some, the issue they are rethinking is actually coming to church. Many churches – including ours – were shut down for a time, and relied on a video livestream. The ability to do that has been, of course, a great blessing for us. And for those unable to attend worship in person, it continues to be a blessing. And we should give thanks for that blessing.

But we have a knack for taking good gifts and finding ways to misuse them. And many Christians, here and across the country – Christians who *could* physically come to church now – have begun to wonder ... why bother actually going? Why all the work? Why the big production? Can't I get the same thing at home? And it's so much more comfortable there! And so much more convenient! And they begin to rethink – in significant ways – their relationship to the worship of the church.

For others, the issue causing them to rethink their relationship to the Church is hurt or anger. There has been a lot of conflict in the past 15 months ... some of it about the pandemic, some about politics, some about our culture. And maybe you've been hurt. Maybe you've been angered. And maybe you find yourself saying: Why should I give myself to a congregation? Why should I make myself vulnerable? Why should I enter into deep relationships with others in a church? If this is what people are like, isn't it better, to keep my heart safe, to protect it, and keep others at a distance?

And so, whether you keep going to the same church, or go to a different one, or stop going altogether, you keep others at a distance. You don't entrust yourself to them. You isolate yourself, even if you're surrounded by others. That is another way many Christians in our country are rethinking their relationship to the Church.

For still others, their re-evaluation centers on disappointment. They been disappointed by the actions of many in the Church ... and so they begin to ask why they should be a part of the Church at all. They are disappointed by how the Church has responded to the pandemic, or to the politics of 2020, or to the cultural challenges of the last year ... and they respond by seeing the Church more as a liability than an asset to their Christian life. They decide they might be better off going the Christian life alone. They can rely on books and recorded sermons, because they fear that the Church is more likely to pull them and their children away from God than to draw them closer. Which then becomes one more way that many Christians are fundamentally rethinking their relationship to the Church.

And we could go on. At the heart of each of these impulses, and others like them is the question: Do we really need the Church? Is it really necessary? Is it really good? Is it really beneficial?

There are several answers to those questions – several ways to approach them.

But this morning I want to look at those questions from just one vantage point: from the vantage point of Pentecost. Because Pentecost tells us something about the work of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost tells us that the Holy Spirit is given to the Church, to work in and through the local church community.

Now, of course it is true that the Holy Spirit is also given to individual believers. That is a truth repeatedly affirmed in the Bible and also deserving of our attention. But the Holy Spirit is not just given to us as individuals. It is also given to the Church as a community. And in our culture and our setting because we are so prone to individualism, we tend to focus on the first and

neglect the second. So this morning we will spend some time on the second: the fact that the Holy Spirit is given to the Church, to work in and through the church community. And that corporate, or community aspect of the Holy Spirit's work is highlighted in the events of Pentecost.

From beginning to end, our passage this morning is about the work of the Holy Spirit in and through a community – through the Church as community, not just a collection of individuals.

In verse one we are reminded that on Pentecost the Holy Spirit is poured out not on a number of individuals each off on their own. It's poured out on the church gathered together as a community.

This special work of the Holy Spirit begins with the church as a gathered community when the chapter begins, and it also ends with the church as a gathered community when the chapter ends. Verses forty-two through forty-seven are not a separate story – it is the natural conclusion of Pentecost. What we see at the end is a description of how the Holy Spirit is continuing to shape the community of the church.

And in between those two pictures of the church as a gathered community, with the Holy Spirit at work in it, we have the account of the Spirit adding to that community, as the sermon of Peter leads not only to individual conversions, but to an increase in the community of the Church.

Again and again the events of Pentecost point us to the fact that the Holy Spirit is given to the Church, to work in and through the church community.

And as he worked then, so he continues to work now. And so, if we want to receive the fullness of the gifts that God has given to his people through the Holy Spirit, then we need the Church.

Because the Holy Spirit helps the Church to fulfill its calling. Ed Clowney lists the three main callings of the Church as: worship, spiritual nurture, and witness. [Clowney, 117]

Worship, nurture, and witness – or, we might say: worship, spiritual growth, and mission.

All of which are important aspects of the Christian life. And all of which God provides through the Holy Spirit, working in the life of the church community.

We began this morning by asking: Do we really need the Church?

Pentecost tells us yes, we do. We need the Church because the Holy Spirit has been given to the Church, to work in and through the church community. And how is the Spirit at work within the church community? He is at work helping us worship, growing us spiritually, and working through us in mission.

And if we willingly bypass the church community as we pursue those things – as we pursue worship, spiritual growth, and witness – then those aspects of our Christians lives, separated from the work of the Spirit in the Church, will often become superficial and ineffective.

Let me explain what I mean.

## **Worship**

Consider worship. There are more worship resources for us to receive on our own than ever before – whether recorded worship music, streaming services, sermon podcasts, and more. Now, none of that is a bad thing. It should be a good thing. It should be an amazing supplement to our life of worship in our local church community.

It's when we choose to let those things replace, rather than supplement, the worship life of our church community, that we begin to forsake the unique ways that the Spirit would bless us in and through the church.

And this tends to make our worship more superficial. It becomes more about us – about our preferences, our wants, our experiences. It becomes more de-personalized – more of a commodity that we download than a communal activity we participate in. If we willingly replace worship in the Christian community with those resources we enjoy alone, then we miss something.

Now, of course, sometimes we can't attend worship in person. Sometimes circumstances or illness keep us from the gathered congregation for worship. Sometimes, for a season – and maybe a long one – as an individual or as a family you need to worship online. That is still real worship, and the Holy Spirit works in us as we worship that way. But even as the Spirit meets us where we are, our separation from the larger church community should bother us a little. It should feel like something is not quite right. We should be blessed by such worship, but we should never feel fully comfortable in it. We should long to be with the congregation.

Because the Holy Spirit helps us to worship in the context of relationships. The Holy Spirit shapes our worship in the context of community. And we see that in our text.

Think of the experience of those gathered on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit fell on them. Their experience was many things, but one of the things it was was an experience of worship. At the heart of it, we are told in verse eleven, was the church gathered, proclaiming the mighty works of God. That is a pretty good definition of worship.

And as worship, it was a community experience. Each person not only told of the mighty works of God themselves, but they heard others tell of them. Each person not only had a flame of fire above their head – they saw miraculous flames above the heads of others.

For that gathering of believers, Pentecost was not primarily an internal experience for them, but a shared community experience that they would talk about together for the rest of their lives.

In the same way, when we gather for worship, it is not for a merely internal experience. We gather for a reason – and it's not just because that's the easiest way to distribute the sermon or

the musical accompaniment. We gather because corporate worship is to be a community event. And it is in that community event that the Holy Spirit is at work in special ways.

The Apostle Paul says to the church in Ephesus: “be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” Paul links being filled with the Spirit to worship, but to worship that is communal. It’s actually kind of shocking that he doesn’t tell us here to address *God* in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (though we obviously should do that). He says we are to address *one another* in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Because that is one way that the Spirit works. And so, when we gather here together for worship, we are not just singing to God – we are singing also to one another.

And the relational aspect of that is key. When you are here, you are surrounded by people who are addressing you in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. And they are people, ideally, whom you know and who know you. They’re people who you have wept with and worked with, or fought with and reconciled with. They’ve taught your kids in Sunday school, or they’ve come to you for help with something. You have real relationships with them – a history, with both highs and lows – and through it all God, by the Holy Spirit, has been at work. And now, together, you gather, and you worship. You address God, *and one another* in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, and the Holy Spirit knits you together as you do.

Which means that when you voluntarily opt out of corporate worship, you not only deny yourself the blessings of the Holy Spirit that come with it, but you reduce the blessings that the Spirit would impart to others through you – through your presence here.

As we’ve said, sometimes our absence is not voluntary. Sometimes sickness, circumstances, a calling to care for someone, or some other trial keeps us away. Those are realities of life in this broken world. But they are very different things from choosing to be absent regularly, out of convenience.

If possible, we are to pursue a pattern of presence in corporate worship, because it is in such patterns that the Holy Spirit so often works. It is as we meet “day by day,” as we read in verse forty-six, that the Lord often does his work among us, by his Holy Spirit.

That is the first way that the Holy Spirit works through the community of the church – he works through our worship.

## **Spiritual Growth**

A second way that the Holy Spirit works in and through the community of the Church is for the discipleship – the spiritual growth – of believers.

And this includes a number of aspects of spiritual care: it includes spiritual nurture, shepherding, and equipping God’s people to serve his kingdom.

And while spiritual growth is, of course, something we are to pursue individually, it is also something we are to pursue in community. And when we sever our spiritual growth from the community of the church, it also begins to become superficial and ineffective.

When we seek spiritual growth in voluntary isolation, it often becomes more and more self-centered. It becomes all about us. We want to grow for our own sake. We want to decide *how* we grow, *where* we grow, *when* we grow, and for *what purpose* we will grow. We pursue spiritual goals that appeal to us. We employ means that we find enjoyable. We listen to voices that tell us what we want to hear.

And as we do that, our spiritual growth becomes depersonalized and professionalized. Now, there is a place for professionals in our spiritual lives – whether counselors, theologians, well-known preachers or otherwise. But when we disconnect our spiritual growth from a local congregation, we will soon find ourselves looking *only* to professionals. We can begin to believe that only professionals have anything to offer us. And we begin searching for the very best professionals, because we more and more see our spiritual growth as hinging on that.

But that is not the pattern we see in our text. What we see in verses forty-two through forty-seven is a community of ordinary people, growing together. Sure, the apostles had a very special calling. But remember, they were not celebrities at this point. And individuals were not working through their teaching with professionals, but in community. We see in verse forty-two that the devotion to the apostles teaching went hand-in-hand with the devotion to the fellowship. They were in fellowship, applying the teaching to themselves and one another. And it was there that the Holy Spirit was at work. They were living out their faith together, side-by-side, and in their interactions with one another: sacrificially loving one another, giving of their wealth to help each other, fellowshiping with one another, being kind and generous to one another.

And so the Holy Spirit continues to work today.

I can tend to think I need professionals to really help me grow spiritually – books by deep thinkers, or sermons by highly successful pastors. But often, I need people around me, in relationship with me, saying basic things to me. I need my wife to gently ask me how much I'm actually praying about something we've been talking about. I need another elder to remind me with kindness in his voice that we are called on to forgive those who have hurt us in the church. I need my good friend from seminary to push back and point out that I'm not really looking at the situation before me as if God is sovereign. I need the congregant who models patient faithfulness in difficult circumstances to me. I need my daughters to help me marvel at the things that God has made as they talk with me. And I could go on.

We all need people that God has put in our lives, and whom the Holy Spirit is working through. We need them to remind us what we already believe. We need them to help us see what the Lord has put in front of us. We need them to hear us with the compassion with which God hears us. We need them to help us with the ordinary challenges before us.

And in each of these ways what we receive is not only their work, but the work of the Holy Spirit.

For the Holy Spirit is the one who equips the community of the church so that it can work in these ways. The Apostle Paul writes: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” [1 Cor 12:4-7]

What are the gifts, and services, and activities you need to receive from the Holy Spirit, through others in the church? And what are the gifts, or services, or activities that the Holy Spirit has empowered in you for the good of others in our congregation?

What are those things for you? What are the ways you need the people in this room? And what are ways that you are able to bless the people in this room?

And how much have you devoted yourself to both of those things? Verse 42 says that the believers devoted themselves to the fellowship. Are you devoted to the fellowship of the church – both in terms of what you need from them and what they can receive from you?

Or do you tend to neglect one or both of those aspects? Do you tend to stress what you have to give, and try to deny what you need? Or do you tend to look to receive, without giving to those who need from you?

The Holy Spirit works among us, in the community of the church, by helping us serve one another’s spiritual growth: spiritually nurturing, and discipling, and equipping one another.

So we see the Holy Spirit working through the community of the Church in our worship. We see the Holy Spirit working through the community of the church in our discipleship and spiritual growth.

## **Mission**

Third, we see the Holy Spirit working through the community of the Church in our mission to witness to the unbelieving world.

And again, when we fail to rely on the Spirit’s work in the church, our approach to mission often becomes shallow and inefficient.

When we see the task of evangelism – of sharing the gospel with those around us – as a solo calling, we either feel crushed by the responsibility of the calling, or we just give up on it as an impossible task. And then we often either de-personalize the call to mission or we professionalize it. We either pursue evangelism only to strangers, divorced from real relationships, or we see evangelism and mission as something that we just pay other people to go and do.



But the picture here in Acts chapter two is not of just individuals going out, but of witness, and evangelism, and local mission, as a project of the church community.

The day of Pentecost begins and ends with the community of the church. Sure, the Apostle Peter has a big up-front role to play. But it's not a solo work. It was the community that drew the crowd before Peter's sermon, and the community that ministered to the crowd after Peter's sermon. And after the day of Pentecost that community dynamic continued.

Yes, the apostles did many signs and wonders, as we read in verse forty-three. But it was the whole community that had favor with all people, as we read a few verses later. And it was in the context of the life of the community that we read in verse forty-seven that "the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

Local mission and evangelism are a project of the church community. Of course we are called to that work as individuals as well, but often God uses the church community.

One member may be more gifted at inviting people to Sunday worship, or another church event. Another member may be especially good at connecting with such visitors when they're there. One of our ministers may preach on a Sunday, or another leader may speak at a different event. But it will be someone else – maybe the person who invited them, or maybe someone they met while here – who may be best to follow-up with them, to invite them again, or even to challenge them in some way. Ordinarily, evangelism is not a solo project. It is a group project. We should be doing it together. As you think about sharing your faith, you should be thinking about how you can connect that person with others here in your congregation, who may also be able to build a genuine relationship with them and tell them about Christ. And if you see someone new here at the church, you should be anxious to connect with them, to be open to how the Holy Spirit may use you in their life. The Holy Spirit is at work in and among us, and so we need the Church if we are to be faithful to and effective in Christ's call to mission.

## **The Way Forward**

Do we really need the Church? That is the question we began with.

The answer we see is that we do. We do, because in the community of the church the Holy Spirit works in special ways. He works in the church to bless our worship, to grow us in our faith, and to make use of us in mission.

The last question to ask then is, what do you need to do in light of that truth?

What do you need to do in light of that truth? What is the next step for you?

And here's the thing ... most of us, I think, keep the main point of this sermon in mind when we think about our goal in what we do next ... but we forget our main point when it comes to deciding our actual next step. So we may remember that our goal is to get more deeply connected

to the church community, but forget it when we think of *how* we can get more connected. Instead, we tend to think of next steps we would take as things we do on our own.

So we think: I need to get my act together and get to church more. I need to get my act together and try to connect to more people. I need to get my act together and try to find deeper relationships. I need to get my act together and invite more people to church.

Our first step is usually a solo step ... something we do alone ... and therefore without the help of the Spirit working through the church ... and therefore something we will often fail at.

And so here is my challenge to you: Figure out what you need to do, and then immediately, this week, maybe this afternoon, enlist someone in the church to help you. Ask someone else to be the means by which the Holy Spirit helps you pursue what you need to pursue.

If you haven't been coming often enough to actually be present here in worship, when there is nothing really stopping you, then tell that to someone in the church – someone outside of your household – and say to them “Would you help me? Would you encourage me to do this? Would you follow-up with me about it? Would you hold me accountable? Would you help me?”

If you haven't been physically present in worship, but for good reason – for health reasons or something else – but you know you need to connect with others in other ways to try to make up for that, contact someone and say “Hey, I need help. I'm letting myself be more isolated than I need to be. Would you help me connect with others? Would you give me advice on that? Would you help me to actually do it?”

If you have avoided deep relationships in the church, contact someone – someone outside your household – and tell them that, and ask them to help you connect. Maybe you are here all the time. Maybe you are seen at every church event. Maybe you are looked up to. But you know that no one really knows you. No one really knows what's going on in your heart or your life. Reach out to someone and say that to them. Don't go home and work out a plan that you'll try to accomplish on your own. Seek the help of the Holy Spirit through the church. Just reach out to someone, as a first step, and ask for their help. And if that doesn't work, reach out to someone else.

Or maybe you are someone who hears this sermon and says “Steve, I could not possibly be more connected here. Seven generations of my family currently worship here together. I have friends from childhood here. I went to school here, my children went to school here, people know me well here, I've got the community connection thing covered.”

Great! That is wonderful. Keep that up.

And then realize that your calling is probably to actively and intentionally reach out to those who aren't so connected here.

Our church, like most, tends to have concentric circles of people, with some, at the core, more connected, and others, towards the outer ring, less connected. Everyone here may be very

friendly. But it can be pretty hard to actually break in past the first couple outer circles. Trust me, it's true.

Those who can often help others connect better to the community are those who are already at the center – who already have the deepest connections. But often, it's that very group at the center that is less likely to reach out. Because they already have so many good connections here, and they're comfortable just sticking with those ... not reaching out to others. And so on Sundays and at other events, they talk to the same people, who are already in their inner circle. And that is understandable ... but it's also a failure to use the gifts God has given you.

The Holy Spirit has given you a gift in making you so connected here. But the gift is not meant to be used for your own comfort. It's meant to bless others. Start a list. Who are the people who are less connected here, who you need to reach out to? That is your duty in the Body. If you refuse to do it, you may be resisting the work that the Holy Spirit could be doing through you.

And of course that's not just a calling for the uber-connected. It's a calling for all of us. We all need to consider how the Spirit may use us to help others become more rooted in the church community.

## **Conclusion**

The details may look different for each of us, but the basics are the same, because they are truths rooted in the events of Pentecost.

Jesus Christ our risen Lord has poured out the Holy Spirit on his Church.

Let us seek the blessing of that Spirit, by seeking to be the kind of community the Spirit is working to make our church into: a community that worships together, addressing one another by the Holy Spirit in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs; a community that grows together, caring for one another, building one another up, and bearing one another's burdens, in real relationships through the Holy Spirit; and a community that goes out in mission together, working as a community to bring others to know the Lord, in reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit.

That is the Spirit's work in us. Let us devote ourselves to it, that we too might display the mighty works of God.

Amen.

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### **This sermon draws on material from:**

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Translated by John Vriend. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006. [Referred to in text as "RD3"]

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