

Going With the Flow

May 31, 2020

If you haven't caught on yet, today is Pentecost Sunday, 50 days after Easter Sunday, the specific day in history when 1990 years ago today that Jesus's promise of the Holy Spirit came upon his followers, 10 days after He ascended to heaven to be seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. It was and is by the power of that Spirit flowing through many saints that the proclamation of the gospel spread so rapidly and pervasively from a relatively small band of faithful followers. This is what we recognize and celebrate on this day every year, and some refer to it as the birthday of the Church – the big C Church universal which spans all denominations, time, and space. So happy birthday to us and all church people everywhere!

As it has been in so many times in history, we certainly need the Holy Spirit flowing through us and others to restore order in the madness's we are experiencing these days, for human efforts alone are simply not enough. I pray that we in our congregation might be messengers of biblical wisdom, peace, and grace in a world that is rapidly degenerating into arrogant self-righteousness. It wouldn't take much for me to go off on that subject, particularly the church leaders who sometimes seem to be leading the way down to the abyss, but today is about the Holy Spirit coming to our aid in such times, so we'll stick with the original message.

I've mentioned before that the very first sermon I presented after graduating seminary was on Pentecost Sunday; we were in Jacksonville, and I was "in conversation with" a Pastor Nominating Committee from a church which requested that I lead worship in what they refer to as "*a neutral pulpit.*" We had a wonderful service at a church suitably named *St. Andrews*, and afterwards the PNC extended a call to a special category called *designated pastor* which launched four years of fruitful ministry in a church where I was one of the longer-term pastors over their 100 year history.

It was there that I first told the story of our daughter Vicki's college experiences with the Holy Spirit at *Warner Southern* just south of here on US 27 – a Church of God Pentecostal school (retell the cafeteria encounter).

Pentecost Sunday holds a special place in my preacher heart; and at seminary I more fully learned about the Reformed understanding of what I grew up knowing as *The Holy Ghost*. Next week will be *Trinity Sunday*, when I will probably say more about the coeternal nature of the Holy Spirit, but for this week we'll explore how we understand the role of the Spirit.

Presbyterians "believe" in and rely upon the Holy Spirit yet historically don't speak about it as much as some other denominations. In my first semester Reformed Theology class, while studying the works of John Calvin, I was intrigued with all the things he wrote about the Holy Spirit, and they really resonated with me.

Beyond the concept that we are bonded to Christ through the Spirit, another very big thing is the conviction that the Holy Spirit was instrumental in the writing, transmission, and preservation of scripture; and then beyond that, the Spirit has a significant role in our reading, understanding, and interpreting it. Further, Calvin expounded on the understanding that the true *preaching* of God's word is an extension of the Holy Spirit, flowing through what we hear.

It was then that I took on the practice of labeling this part of a worship service as *the message* rather than my sermon. If I'm doing it right up here, this is not Pastor Drew's idea of what he wants to say, but what it is that the Holy Spirit communicates through me- my job is primarily to listen... And the Reformed understanding goes beyond what emanates from me to how it is *you* hear and respond to the word of God's message to us on any given Sunday.

The thing is, sometimes it works better than others. At any point, anybody in the process can fail to fully and faithfully join with the Spirit and so miss the point. That unfortunately, is part of our feeble human nature; to quote another of Calvin's teachings, it's because we are what he terms *totally depraved* and prone to sin.

And so on this Sunday, 50 days after Easter every year, we finish off our journey through the historically accurate timeline of Biblical events that began with Palm Sunday. We Christians know Pentecost as the day the Holy Spirit came; yet before that, Pentecost was observed every year on this day as a Jewish festival mandated in Leviticus 23. In Greek, the word Pentecost means *fiftieth*. (penta = five, pentagon, etc)

In Hebrew it is known as *Shavuot*, which means *weeks*, because it occurs 7 full weeks after the *wave offering*. (did you remember to present that this year?) Leviticus 23:16 says, *Count off fifty days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath (yesterday), and then present an offering of new grain to the Lord.* That is today, did you bring your grain offering?

The Hebrew people had many different feasts and festivals they had to observe; some were more significant and elaborate than others. Today the lectionary suggests a passage about Jesus going to a different festival, the *Feast of Tabernacles*, which occurs in the Fall. At this time, he was dodging those pesky Jewish leaders who were always seeking to get ahold of him; the story begins with Jesus speaking to his disciples:

John 7:8-39 You go to the festival. I am not going up to this festival, because my time has not yet fully come." ⁹ After he had said this, he stayed in Galilee.

¹⁰ However, after his brothers had left for the festival, he went also, not publicly, but in secret. ¹¹ Now at the festival the Jewish leaders were watching for Jesus and asking, "Where is he?"...

¹⁴ Not until halfway through the festival did Jesus go up to the temple courts and begin to teach. ¹⁵ The Jews there were amazed and asked, "How did this man get such learning without having been taught?" ¹⁶ Jesus answered, "My teaching is not my own. It comes from the one who sent me. ¹⁷ Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. ¹⁸ Whoever speaks on their own does so to gain personal glory, but he who seeks the glory of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him..."

²⁸ Then Jesus, still teaching in the temple courts, cried out, "Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own authority, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him,²⁹ but I know him because I am from him and he sent me." ...

³⁷ On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink."³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."³⁹ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified.

>>> All of those things Jesus said play greatly into our understanding of how the Holy Spirit works through not just Jesus, not just preachers, but through all of us; *through you*. Jesus, Immanuel, the *Son of God himself* said, *my teaching is not my own. It comes from the one who sent me*. And about us he said, *rivers of living water will flow from within them*.

Remember, the style of John's writing is to help set the record straight about the gospel where he felt the others left some things not clarified. That's why he wrote, *Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified*. We've read an assortment of passages in recent weeks about Jesus foretelling about the coming of the παρακλήτωσ (paraclete), the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, coming to those who wait upon it.

As we explored last week, the disciples dutifully waited in Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension which I promise was more spectacular than any of our frequent space coast launches. Jesus did not tell them how long to wait, but as it turns out it was just 10 days, and since they were in Jerusalem, there was a festival to observe:

Acts 2:1-12 *When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*

⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken.⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?"⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

>>> What it meant was the start of the Church, the vessel which Jesus chooses to spread the gospel and carry on his mission & ministry. It meant that his people were now empowered with all the wonders of the Holy Spirit; it meant that Peter and the others finally connected the dots and fully understood all the things Jesus taught and revealed to them. And it meant that the message that began in a relatively small region now had the power to be proclaimed to the ends of the earth.

Without Pentecost and without faithful generations that responded to the Spirit in many ways, we would not be here today. Jesus said that Spirit would flow from those that believe in him, and he was right. We here as part of his Church universal are the keepers of that in this tumultuous time in the world, and the question for us is whether we keep it to ourselves or share it as it is intended.

That may seem to be a lot of weight upon your shoulders, but rest assured none of us are singly responsible to keep the gospel message going, just our own part of it. But you're not off the hook; your own part of it is an *important* part. The biggest thing we can do is to keep our hearts receptive to the Spirit doing his work through us.

The Apostle Paul wrote some wonderful words to the church in Corinth to help them understand that during a time when it appears there were factions vying for influence between each other.

1 Corinthians 12:3-13 Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴ There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.⁶ There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.⁸ To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit,⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit,¹⁰ to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues.¹¹ All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

¹² Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.¹³ For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

>>> One Spirit, one Jesus, one God. We are Presbyterians yet we come from a variety of denominations representing one religion, Christianity. That is one of the reasons I highlight the *Kingdom* concept we have here at SLPC. One person or one church or even one denomination can't do it all.

Yet one Spirit can, and that is the Spirit of God manifested in and flowing through each one who chooses to put their trust in our savior Jesus Christ. Before he departed, he promised not to leave us orphans, and on Pentecost many years ago, he made good on that vow.

That's a powerful force we have at our disposal, and with it comes great responsibility. It is a power we are obligated to share, it is a power we are called to demonstrate, and it is a power that we celebrate on this Pentecost Sunday. Amen.