

## Aided by the Spirit

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

Pentecost and Confirmation  
May 19, 2013

Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:22-30; John 14:12-17

“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” -- Acts 2:4

If you attend here regularly, you know that Karen Wagner is fond of expanding the vocabulary of our children by discussing what she calls “church words” with them – words like “Alleluia” and “Lent” and “Baptism.” These are our words, the words of the church, peculiar to the things that are important to us and help us express what we believe, why we believe it, and how we try to put those beliefs into practice.

Today is Pentecost, another of those church words, and it’s also the day when four of our young people will affirm their baptism through the rite of confirmation. There’s a string of church words in that sentence, and they all mean something important to who we as Christians are, what we do, and why we do it.

You heard Meghan Dorey read the story of Pentecost to us from the book of Acts. It’s an intimidating lesson to read because of all those ethnic groups that Luke felt compelled to name: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia and all the rest. These were those devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit tore open the envelope of the gospel message so that they, too, could hear in their own language, what God had done to their faith and to their world.

This was not their grandmothers’ Judaism. Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet and teacher in the tradition of Israel’s great prophets, had cut a new channel for the waters of his ancestral religion, and those waters were bringing new life to all kinds of people – not just Judean Jews – whose souls were thirsting for a new way of being in this world and the world to come.

Those thirsting people, hearing the gospel in the hubbub of many tongues being spoken at once, are considered the founding members of the Christian church. The prophet Isaiah, writing centuries before, had foreseen that people would come from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south, to be refreshed at God’s table, and here they were, being refreshed by the good news of salvation.

Whenever and wherever and however people are able to hear the good news of God’s love for the world, shown to us in Jesus the Christ, there the Christian church is being born.

And the church has to be born again – and again and again and again. For the church of which Jesus is the head must be born not just once in a dramatic, sometimes chaotically emotional display of piety, but in every generation and in every believer, because we believe that it is not we who make the church the church but rather it is the Holy Spirit who makes the church the body of Christ on earth.

It is the Spirit of God’s love – infinite, persistent, and eternal – that allows ordinary folks like us to discern in the life and teachings of Jesus God’s will for the world. Ordinary

people will not get this without the aid of the Holy Spirit, and the reason they won't get it is because it's so unnatural. The gospel of Jesus Christ is one of the most unnatural sets of belief ever to smack up against cold-blooded reality.

Jesus said that we find our lives by losing them – that's a very unnatural idea. Jesus said that are to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors – another very unnatural idea. Jesus said that unless we are willing to take up our cross and follow him to crucifixion and resurrection, we cannot enter the narrow gate the leads to eternal life – who believes that sacrificing ourselves now is the way to gain ourselves for eternity? Who believes this stuff?

The Christian church does, or at least we say we do, and I think most of us genuinely want to believe it. But without the aid of God's Holy Spirit, I believe most of us will never cross the threshold from wanting to believe to living our beliefs.

For ten weeks, Karen and I, with the help of a number of you in the congregation, have been exploring with our confirmation class what it might mean for each of them to assumes the role of a self-professed, adult Christian. What might it mean for each of them – Meghan, Meghan, Ryan, and David – to be a follower of Jesus Christ when there is no mom or dad or grandparent looking over their shoulder and perhaps prodding them in the back? How will each of them hear the gospel in a language that will help them midwife the Christian church in their time and in their place? Or will they ignore the church, as so many of their generation appears to be doing, and leave its message of salvation to be stillborn?

None of us at this moment knows, and that's why we turn to God in prayer. In a few minutes, all of us here this morning will lay hands on each of these young people and ask God's Holy Spirit to help her or him become a follower of Jesus Christ in the world. The heart of the rite of confirmation is a prayer, and we pray not out of desperation, but out of conviction and hope. We pray out of the conviction that Jesus's promise of providing us with a spiritual counselor – the Holy Spirit – is trustworthy and true. And we pray out of the hope that Meghan, Meghan, Ryan, and David will incarnate the gospel in their generation at least as well as we have in ours and, we hope, better.

And they will have help. They will be surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, which includes us and which no one can number, brought together by that love, as George Matheson so memorably wrote, that wilt not let us go.

We do not believe that God has abandoned us to our own devices. We do not believe that we are incapable of rising above the merely natural. We do not believe that life is pointless and meaningless. We do not believe that the one who dies with the most toys wins.

What we believe, rather, we will all say together in a few minutes in our Statement of Faith, which is simply our version of the historic beliefs of the Christian church. In doing so, we will remind ourselves that are members of the body of Jesus Christ on earth, also known as the church. We will sing about that body – the Word of God incarnate – in our closing hymn, and I would ask you to pay particular attention to William How's description of that body in his text. Remind yourself that this is who you are – who we are – by the grace of God's Holy Spirit. And ask yourself how those words might apply to the new church of Meghan, Meghan, Ryan, and David.

Today is a celebration – the birthday of the church – and we are decked out in festive red to mark it. Today is also a launching, as we launch four of our young people into the next stage of their lives – and their lives with us and with all the communities of faith that will be their spiritual homes in the years to come. This is a day of joyous anticipation, and, aided by the Holy Spirit, we will rejoice and be glad in it.