

Spirit Power

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Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-16:13

“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

A well-known aphorism in Judaism says, “After an Abraham comes an Isaac.” If you reflect on the stories of the patriarchs in Genesis for a minute or two, you’ll understand what that aphorism is saying. It’s saying that after a somebody comes a nobody. It’s saying that disappointments often follow greatness. And it’s saying that the work of the Spirit in one person’s life cannot be passed on to another person, even a person who inherits the genes of someone manifestly touched by the Spirit. As Jesus said to Nicodemus in John’s gospel (3:8), “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” The Spirit is unfettered, Jesus is saying, and it does not conform to our bidding.

Being born of the Spirit is tricky language around these parts, and we know why. Spirit-talk in what, not so long ago, was the American frontier, evokes images of out-of-control religious enthusiasts, whipped into religious hysteria by preachers obsessed with sin, salvation, and damnation.

My earliest church memories come from that sort of Christianity. My mother attended a Pilgrim Holiness church in Springfield, Ohio for a few years, and she carried me there with her when I was a baby. As I grew into a child of three or four or five, I remember women and men seated on opposite sides of the central aisle of a tiny sanctuary, who, when it came time to pray, stood up, turned to face the back of the room, got down on their hands and knees, and rested their forearms and foreheads on the wooden seats of the pews, using them as a kind of makeshift prayer desk or *prie-dieu*. The prayers were long, labored, and loud. Cries went up to heaven, largely penitential, as I recall, and awash with many tears. I sat on the pew and watched, a little alarmed at the commotion all around me. Eventually, things calmed down and my mother became her normal self again, to my great relief. It wouldn’t take Sigmund Freud to tell me that those early childhood experiences with that kind of religion probably account for much of my distrust of heavily emotional religion to this day.

And I know I’m not alone. Many of you have had similar encounters at some point in your life; and invoking the Spirit to provoke people to highly emotional

religious experiences has been part and parcel of American Christianity since Jonathan Edwards terrified those “sinners in the hands of an angry God” in Enfield, Connecticut in 1741. Charles Grandison Finney, the great revivalist and president of Oberlin College a century later, softened the edges of that fire-and-brimstone preaching a bit, but he kept the emotional pitch to try to bring people to Jesus. The emphasis may have shifted in Victorian America, but the means and ends remained the same.

And what may shock some of you is that I share the ends if not the means. I believe that life here is better with Jesus Christ than without, and I believe that there is such a thing as eternal life – I spoke of it recently – and I believe that Jesus Christ makes that eternal life available to all who will accept it. That makes me a classic evangelical preacher. And, like Finney in his day, I’m a progressive, not a regressive, evangelical. Finney introduced such radical innovations as allowing women to speak at his revivals, something women had never been allowed to do before and which many people considered scandalous even in Finney’s day. Paul, after all, had not allowed women to speak in his churches, but Finney took Jesus more seriously than he took Paul, and he took seriously Jesus’s words to Nicodemus, as do I, that the Spirit blows where it will, and that it is not our job to quench it.

So today we celebrate that Spirit’s uncontrolled and uncontrollable blowing on this day of Pentecost. Pentecost, which means “fiftieth,” was a Jewish festival occurring fifty days after Passover, and it celebrated God’s giving of the Torah or Great Instruction, on Mount Sinai.

As our reading from Acts tells the story, devout Jews from all over the world were living in cosmopolitan Jerusalem at the time, and the Holy Spirit touched Jesus’s disciples in the room where they had gathered to celebrate the feast, and they began to speak in foreign languages. A crowd gathered, amazed that some backwater Gallileans had become polygots telling about God’s saving deeds of power. Cretans heard the story in Cretan, Arabs heard it in Arabic, and residents from Mesopotamia heard it in whatever they spoke in Mesopotamia.

The Spirit was working, and people were telling the story of salvation so that others could hear it, and then those others could decide for themselves whether to embrace that story as their story, the life of God’s people as their life, and the way of Jesus the Christ as their way. Obstacles were being overcome. Divisions were being reunited. Wounds were being healed with the ointment of the gospel. That’s Pentecost. That’s the work of the Spirit. That’s the birthday party of the Christian church.

And that’s what we celebrate today. We don’t celebrate over-the-top emotionalism. We don’t celebrate religious enthusiasm that flares up and dies away as quickly as it came. We don’t celebrate knowing nothing and feeling everything. And we certainly don’t celebrate telling the old, old story in such a way that it turns the story of Jesus Christ carnivalesque.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is about redemption, reconciliation, reuniting, and restoration. It is about overcoming the myriad divisions that we sinful human beings are so good at wedging between ourselves and God, ourselves and one another, ourselves and creation. “He himself is before all things,” Paul wrote

about Jesus to the Colossians, “and in him all things hold together.”

That’s the good news – that in Jesus Christ, all things hold together – and it’s ours to share. Ever since David Riesman told us in *The Lonely Crowd* that our culture has produced increasingly lonely people even as we are surrounded by more and more of us, sociologists have been telling us that American people are starving for real community and are desperate for authentic relationships. I believe that. My observations and my experience tell me that as organized religion has waned, loneliness and our desperate attempts to combat it have waxed. And the spiritual-but-not-religious ethos regnant today isn’t meeting that need for authentic human existence. It’s produced a sea of seekers and virtually no finders.

Well, I’m a finder. As arrogant and old-fashioned as it sounds, I’m here to tell you that Christianity works. It doesn’t work perfectly, it doesn’t work all the time, and it has a great deal of which it rightly is to be ashamed. But when I read the story of Pentecost, and hear that our mandate as Christian people is to tell the story of God’s love for the world so that other people can hear it, believe it, and live it – that’s good enough for me. My life is given meaning by that commission. My life has a purpose with that send-off. My life is energized by figuring out how to do that. Spirit power gets me out of bed in the morning.

I’m going to sit down in a minute, but before I do, I want to tell you not to write me off because I’m a preacher. A lot of people who listen to sermons do that. It’s all well and good for you to talk about God and Jesus and Spirit power and all the rest – I can hear you saying – because we pay you to do that so that we don’t have to. You’re going to talk about God and we’re going to talk about the Indians or the Cavs, about Mitt Romney’s Mormonism or Barak Obama’s birth certificate, or about whether Ed Fitzgerald is going to be Ohio’s next governor. That’s the stuff we talk about because it’s a whole lot easier than talking about God. Let me offer a story to correct that impression and conclude this sermon.

When the men’s ministry met at my house for a cookout back in April, we were gathered in my living room with plates of food. As I walked in from the kitchen, I overheard Phil Juarez, Ron Ober, and Jim Christensen talking about justification by faith. Between bites of their steak and chicken tacos, ordinary Christian men were talking about what Luther meant, why he said it, and where in the Bible he found such an idea. And I had nothing to do with it! I hadn’t asked them to talk religion, and it wasn’t on the day’s agenda. How it came up I still don’t know and I frankly don’t care. What I do care about it is that it proves what I have always said: you, ordinary all-of-you, are just as capable as the best trained theological minds around to speak of your faith, to speak of the Christian faith, and to say why those matter. You can do that amongst yourselves, and you can do it with those around you. You have that power. Those guys proved that you do. All you have to do is use it.

Use the power granted all of us as Christians on Pentecost. Use your Spirit power, and see how different life can be.