

*The Story: Church/Spirit*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*Jeremiah 31:31-34, Joel 2:28-32, Acts 2:1-8,12-16,22-24,32-33,36-47*

Today's final readings are selections from Acts 2. Listen now to God's Word. "When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?" ... Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel ... Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, "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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off -- for all whom the Lord our God will call." With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

When you think about the word "spirit," what do you think of? I always think of the cheer that goes back and forth between fans – "We've got spirit, yes we do, we've got spirit, what about you?" When that came to mind this week, I started realizing just how that old pep rally standard might just help us to remember that it was the arrival of the Holy Spirit that marked the beginning of the church.

Here's where we left off...Jesus was resurrected on Easter Sunday and appeared to over 500 eyewitnesses over the course of forty days. During that time, he often taught the disciples, explaining everything they had witnessed and experienced and confirming all that was written about Him in the Scriptures. On the fortieth day, he appeared one final time to the disciples, and then an event happened called the Ascension. Jesus rose from the ground into the sky until the disciples could no longer see him, and the disciples were told by angels to stop looking for him...that He would return again, but not to wait. In some of His last instructions to them, Jesus told the disciples not to leave Jerusalem but to wait until Pentecost. Now as we've been reading *The Story*, we've come across Pentecost under a different name...this was also known as the Feast of Weeks or the Feast of Firstfruits. It was celebrated fifty days after the Sabbath during Passover – so the name “pentecost” or “fifty days” stuck. For the ten days between Jesus' ascension and Pentecost, the disciples waited and prayed, mostly in the upper room where they had shared the Passover meal with Jesus.

That's when the Scripture we read this morning happens. The Spirit comes on all the believers together like a violent wind – the word “spirit” in Greek also means “wind,” so the disciples would have had a clue what was going on. They see a visual representation of the Spirit as fire, and then they begin speaking in other languages. That gets everybody's attention. A crowd from all over the known world assembles to hear them praising God in their own languages. A few people scoff at it as being the result of drunkenness, which makes no sense – but it shows us just how unbelievable this was.

Peter quiets the crowd and gives a speech, where he quotes the passage from Joel we heard this morning. He convinces them that this Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified was raised from the dead, proving that He is the awaited Messiah, the Lord, King, and Christ whose coming had been awaited. They are awestruck – and terrified. They realize their own responsibility in the whole thing, as well as their guilt and shame and sin, and they cry out, “What then must we do?” Peter says for them to repent and be baptized, and they too will receive the Holy Spirit. At that moment, as people confess their faith in Jesus Christ and turn from their sin, the church is born. Three thousand come to faith then, and shortly thereafter, their numbers grow to five thousand.

For a period of time, the church grows with great success and little incident. The unity of the believers is incredible. They share their whole lives together – everything they have is held in common. They dedicate themselves to learning about this Jesus and all He is. On occasion they face threats from the religious leaders and those who don't understand, but for a while, they are undisturbed. The Spirit continues to show the power of Jesus through the disciples who heal the sick in droves. When the Pharisees finally do get angry at this new group and have them arrested, the Spirit frees them from prison. The Spirit makes it clear that these followers of Jesus have been given His authority.

Eventually, however, the authorities come after them, and when they do, it gets brutal, even though the Jews had no right under Roman law to put anyone to death. Stephen is the first Christian martyred for his role in the church, and others follow, including the first of the eleven – James, the brother of John. Among the chief persecutors of the church is a young man named Saul, whose reputation precedes him as the most significant foe the church faces. Next week, we'll talk about him a little more and how he went from a Christ-despiser to Christ-follower. In the midst of it all, the church continues to grow and thrive despite the severe threats it faces. And through a vision God gives to Peter confirmed by a God-fearing centurion, those outside of Israel are welcomed into the community. Salvation that appeared to be reserved for the Jews was now available for all who would believe in Jesus regardless of their heritage.

It's easy for us to get caught up in the model of the early church. There's a lot of places that say that they model an "Acts 2" church because they want to capture that excitement and growth. There are a lot of great things happening in those early days. At the same time, though, there are certain things that didn't continue into the long-term plan of the church. And so what I want to concentrate on this morning is the relationship between the church and the Holy Spirit. When we "get" that bond between them, we'll see how the Spirit works in the modern church – even our church.

First, we need to understand this: *the Spirit is the tangible sign of the church – the church is not the church without the Spirit*. Everywhere you look in the book of Acts, where the story of the early church is recorded, you see the Spirit moving. When Pentecost comes, the Spirit is there and leads three thousand people to God through Peter and the disciples. The disciples heal people – the Spirit is there. Peter confronts the Pharisees – the Spirit is there. The disciples are put in prison – they are set free by the Spirit. The non-Jews, the Gentiles, become part of the church when the Holy Spirit is clearly given to them. Everywhere the followers of Jesus go, the Holy Spirit shows up.

Now take a look at the disciples before the Holy Spirit comes. The fellowship is marked by doubt and disbelief even amongst Jesus' closest friends. They want to believe but struggle. Jesus teaches them during this time and they learn more and more, but there's still a cloud over their minds. During those fifty days, there's no further moves made by the Pharisees because they don't have to. Nobody is proclaiming "Jesus is alive" except to their closest friends they can trust. This doesn't mean they have somehow become ungodly people. They simply don't have it in them yet – literally! While they can pray and move forward in very simple steps, they do not have the power and authority to do anything. It's when the Holy Spirit comes that the church itself begins, when the believers become genuinely empowered as Kingdom ambassadors to spread the message that the King has arrived and His Kingdom has begun.

All this talk about the Holy Spirit and the church should make it clear that the church is never a building or a place. The church is the called-out people of God, called for His purposes and plans. While in English we have used the term for the space where we gather and worship, that's never true in the Greek of the New Testament. That's important because the Holy Spirit doesn't empower a building or a sanctuary or anything else. The Holy Spirit empowers us, we who believe.

That begs the question, then: how do believers receive the Holy Spirit? According to the pattern that Peter mentions, the Spirit comes upon us when we repent, believe, and are baptized. Baptism is a sign of cleansing, of new life, of going under the water and coming up changed. For those who are baptized as adults, we believe the Spirit comes in His fullness at that time. We who believe in infant baptism see the Holy Spirit's work also beginning in the earliest stages of life; even before we make a conscious decision to follow God, God begins to change the hearts of those born into His family of faith. That baptism can eventually be accepted or rejected, but the Spirit is still there.

How do we know that we have the Holy Spirit? Many of us have always been in the church and we never noticed some great change that marked our conversion to faith. So what's the sign? Jesus told His disciples that when He left, He would send the Counselor to them who would lead them into all truth. He would remind them of what Jesus taught them and guide them to understand the Scriptures. In fact, Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:16 said that believers "have the mind of Christ." That's the gift of the Holy Spirit. If you have the Holy Spirit, He will be leading you to obey Christ's teachings.

If we have the Holy Spirit, how do we distinguish the Holy Spirit from our natural conscience, which often wants to follow our own selfish way? It's difficult, but here's what I see in Scripture. If what we know to be truth is found in Scripture, then when we hear the Spirit's leading, does it fit with what we know to be true in Scripture? The Spirit is never going to lead us in a direction contrary to what the Bible records as the will of God. The Spirit is never going to lead us into sin. Also, the Spirit may lead us to find our answers in Scripture. If when you are making decisions your "conscience" tells you to search the Scriptures and seek out God's guidance in prayer and focused attention on Him, that's the Spirit talking. We can quiet that voice; Scripture says we can "grieve" the Spirit by not listening to Him and obeying Him. But the Spirit is the one who leads us back to Jesus, the root and source of our faith, and back to His Word as found in Scripture.

Don't take just peace as a natural sign of the Spirit; sometimes, when God wants us to follow Him when it is difficult or painful, the Spirit will distress us and challenge us. But if those challenges and distresses come from reminders of God's holy Word to us, keep listening. He is leading you in His paths. And remember too that you need not figure it out alone. God gives the Spirit to the entire church so that we can discern together what God is doing in our midst.

We've seen that the Holy Spirit is the defining characteristic of the church. What else does the Holy Spirit do? The second major thing I see is this: *the Spirit marks the church with signs for the unbelievers and growth within the believer*. Sometimes we see all these wonders in the early church and we wonder where it all went. We might have met somebody at another church who claims to have spoken in tongues or prophesied or even was involved in a healing. We as Presbyterians tend to clam up about these things; we see these things with a wary eye. That's good, too, because 1 John 4:1 tells us, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." So many so-called faith healers and such turn out to be frauds and lead many astray. At the same time, the Bible shows that these things have been a legitimate part of the church. How can we tell what the Holy Spirit is up to?

In the early church, the Holy Spirit was continuing through the disciples to do miraculous signs, just as Jesus did. They were proofs of the truthfulness of their teaching. But not all of them were continual. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul hints that these signs will one day go away, perhaps when Christ comes again, but most likely when God is truly known. Paul teaches that tongues in particular are a sign for the unbeliever, not the believer. So when we don't see all these signs in every church, it's OK. They aren't for us. At the same time, if you talk to mission agencies about their experiences in foreign cultures that have never heard the gospel, amazing signs often appear, sometimes well before the missionaries even arrive! The signs and wonders are real, but they are to help those who would believe those signs come to faith.

But there is a very real way that the Spirit marks the entire church, and that is with growing each and every Christian in God's love and grace. Just remember what the early church experienced – they were dedicated to learning God's ways. They considered everything they had in common; what's mine is yours and yours is mine. They gave away their stuff and sold it to help those in need. They met together everyday. And what's more, it says they ate together with glad and sincere hearts. How often can we say any of those things? To consider everything we have to belong to God and to give it up for others – and to do it happily? That's not a human thing; that's a Spirit thing. And not only is that kind of life a sign to those outside the church, it helps those who believe continue to grow in faith and maturity. As Proverbs 27:17 tells us, "As iron sharpens iron, so does one man sharpen another."

So how do we become those kind of people, where self-sacrifice and service becomes meaningful and even joyful? It comes from listening to and obeying the Holy Spirit. That doesn't come to us naturally. Our natural urges tell us to look out for number one, and those urges don't go away just because we have the Holy Spirit. But the difference is, we can obey. Paul explains it this way in Romans 7:18 – before the salvation of Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit, he says, “I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.” In comparison, the Holy Spirit makes it possible to actually follow God's will for us. And I believe that as we do so, that obedience becomes more and more a part of us as we are continually transformed into God's image.

We hear a lot these days about people leaving the church...young people who grew up in church only to leave and not come back...and sometimes, it's people who've been in the pews for decades. Some have left because the world preaches a different story from the church, one that's appealing, where I come first and where what everybody does is their own business as long as it doesn't affect me. That's sad. But I think the reason a lot of folks leave, especially our youth, is that the church – those who claim to be Christians – do not live lives that show the signs of the Spirit's work. Some churches preach prosperity, where God gives you material wealth if you give to them – but that's a false gospel. Some churches preach harsh judgment rather than the grace of God – and that's a false gospel. Others preach that anything goes as long as we play nice together – and that's a false gospel.

These are all false gospels because they don't display the power of Jesus Christ, the power that changes broken, battered, and bruised sinners into joyful servants of the living God, servants who turn the other cheek, servants who are kind to those who have wounded them, servants who serve those who would scorn them. Show them that kind of servant heart, show them the sacrificial love that Christ showed, that the early church demonstrated, and they will not forget it. They may question it, yell at it, reject it...but they may also realize that God wants to be in relationship with them and transform them as well. Show our children that kind of servant heart, that love that knows no bounds, that rejects sin but welcomes the sinner with arms wide open, and they will not leave, not for good. Even if for a time they rebel or drift, they will know they have been shown the truth of the love of God...the love that comes from the Spirit and is shown through us, through God's people, through the church.

Are you hearing from the Spirit? Are you following His gentle guidance? Do you live with the kind of joy the early believers displayed to one another and to the world, or do you yearn for it to be a greater part of your life? It can be. Paul's prayer for the Ephesians church was this: “I pray that out of [God's] glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge -- that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” This is real, folks! God wants us to be His church to the world, not here in this building, but out in the community, living out His love in front of people, helping them understand that He is real and His Kingdom is coming and He stands at the door of their hearts and knocks, asking to be let in. He wants us to know His love in all its fullness and to share it with our neighbors and friends. If we display His love to them through the power of the Holy Spirit, we will be the real church. The church and the Holy Spirit are intertwined; they move together. Are you willing to be the true church, to let the Spirit use you as God's instrument? “We've got spirit, yes we do, we've got spirit – what about you?”