

OUR TEACHER

Acts 2:1-21

The Day of Pentecost (Series A)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The epistle lesson is not actually from an epistle. The word “epistle,” by the way, simply means “letter.” And this is not a letter. Acts is a book of history about the works that Jesus continued to do on earth, through the Holy Spirit, after his ascension. The reading for today is Acts 2, verses 1 through 21. It’s only part of the story of what happened that day.

Acts 2 is one of those passages that the Church lives in. What I mean is that we don’t just read it and then move on to something else, but we kind of just camp in it for a while, and we explore this part and then another part. So we don’t always read it in order. It’s on the short list of texts that Christians should know really well, so that we don’t have to read it in order to know what’s going on. But if it’s not that familiar to you, I’ll still summarize it just a bit.

We read the conclusion of it five weeks ago. It ends with 3,000 souls being baptized and added to the church. Next week, on Trinity Sunday, we’ll read the middle part. That’s Peter’s excellent sermon, which the Holy Spirit used to call those 3,000 souls to faith. So I can guarantee that if you come to church next Sunday, you will hear one of the greatest sermons ever preached. And today we’re reading the first part, which led up to Peter’s excellent sermon.

Please stand as you are able for God’s Holy Word. From Acts 2, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus’ name.

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

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

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. ¹⁶ But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ “ ‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,

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- and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams;
18 even on my male servants and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.
19 And I will show wonders in the heavens above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke;
20 the sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.
21 And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

If not for the Holy Spirit, the death of Jesus would have no benefit for us. One preacher even put it this way: “Jesus could have died a thousand deaths, but it would have done us no good if not for the Holy Spirit” (Martin Luther). And it’s true. This, of course, does not take anything away from the sacrifice of Christ, but the work of the Holy Spirit is to take the gifts Christ has won for us, and deliver them to us. The forgiveness earned by Jesus Christ is to be received by faith. In order for someone to benefit from Jesus’ redemption, they must have faith. Without faith, no one will be saved. An even better way to say it is that in order for someone to benefit from Jesus’ redemption, the Holy Spirit must create faith in their heart. That’s what the Holy Spirit does. He takes the good news of what Jesus has done for us, and he teaches it to our hearts and our minds, so that we will trust in it and understand it.

Lutherans are sometimes accused of not having much of a doctrine of the Holy Spirit. This could not be farther from the truth. It might seem that way to outsiders or to those who think of the Holy Spirit’s activity as more exciting. But I actually think that Lutherans have the most robust doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Now, we don’t have a lot of hand-raising, dancing, or speaking in unknown languages. And if that’s what you think of as being very Spirit-filled, then I can see why you might think Lutherans are kind of weak on the Holy Spirit. But we see the Holy Spirit working in other ways. We see the Holy Spirit working in things that look a lot more ordinary. We see the Holy Spirit given in the Sacrament of Baptism. We see the Holy Spirit working whenever the Word of God is read, taught, and proclaimed. We believe and teach that the Holy Spirit calls us to faith through the Gospel, continually teaches us, and constantly preserves us with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. If you look for the Holy Spirit in emotional or ecstatic experiences, you might think that there are many times at church when the Holy Spirit is absent. No, no. Whenever we are gathered in Jesus’ Name, whenever the Word of God is taught and the Sacraments administered, the Holy Spirit is present. Of course, the Holy Spirit is God, so he is always present. But he is especially present with God’s people, attending to the Word and Sacraments of God.

And this is why I say that Lutherans have the most robust doctrine of the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit wants to do signs and wonders among us, great. If he wants to heal people, I would very much be in favor of that. We all should be. We should pray for that. And if it happens, we

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should be excited, but not surprised. These things are not promised to us, but the Holy Spirit can still do them. But I say that Lutherans have the most robust doctrine of the Holy Spirit, because, even if these things do not happen, we believe and confess the truth that the Holy Spirit is living and active among us doing an even more important work, because this is promised to us. He is creating and sustaining a faith that will endure beyond the ups and downs of this life, and that will live on in perfection and holiness for all eternity in the new creation.

One of the ironic things about some of our evangelical or charismatic friends—and I don't mean to pick on any of them; they are sincere Christians; I simply want us to understand what we believe and why we believe it, and sometimes the best way to do that is through contrast. One of the ironic things about some evangelical or charismatic doctrine, is that in conversion, that is, when we first become Christians, they see the sinner as being in control. That is, we, as fallen and sinful creatures, exercise our will to make a decision to follow Christ. But then the most spiritual moments of a Christian's life are when they lose control and the Holy Spirit, supposedly, takes over. That's when, in charismatic churches, you might speak in tongues, prophecy, dance, or roll on the floor. In evangelical churches, it's quite a bit toned down, but the idea is still there. You might not know why you do something or why you feel a certain way, but you say the Holy Spirit is guiding or controlling you. So there's an irony here that our Christian faith starts by us being in control, that is, an unbeliever can do the right thing and decide to give their heart to Jesus, but then the Christian life is a lack of control. It's like the unbeliever has a free will, but the Christian does not.

Lutherans actually switch this around. So we seem very backward to other Christians. We switch it around when we say that, no, conversion is not our work. I did not make a decision to follow Jesus. "I believe that I cannot, by my own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel" (Luther's *Small Catechism*, "The Apostles' Creed"). The thing about us before we are converted is that we hate God. We were enemies of God (Eph. 2:1-4). We wanted nothing to do with him. In conversion, the Holy Spirit takes unwilling enemies, and he makes us his children. He does this through the Word of God and through Baptism.

And then, through the Word of God and the other Sacrament, the Lord's Supper, he conforms our hearts to the will of God. The Holy Spirit created something new when he converted us, and he strengthens this new creation so that we grow to love the things God loves. So Christians, when we do what is right and pleasing to God, are not out of control, but we are very much in control. Remember, one of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal 6:22-24). Being filled with the Holy Spirit does not produce a lack of control. On the contrary, it produces self-control to say, "No," to evil, to crucify our passions and desires, and to willingly live according to God's will. Sometimes we mistakenly think of a Spirit-filled person as being rather excitable; they're willing to go this way or that, wherever they're driven. But this is not true. The Spirit-filled person is not driven by whatever forces excite him. He is in control at all times. When the Holy Spirit conforms our hearts to the will of God, the spirit (with a small "s") in us exercises control over the sinful passions and desires in us. We should not desire to lose control. When we lose control, that's when we yell at our wives, talk back to our parents, click on pages we're not supposed to, slack off at work, eat a tub of ice cream, or take an extra drink. These sinful acts are all a lack of control.

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To be led by the Spirit, filled with the Spirit, or even controlled by the Spirit, means to be in control over these things. I often hear charismatic Christians, and even a lot of evangelicals, talking about losing ourselves or losing control to the Holy Spirit. This is not right. This is dangerous. The Holy Spirit enables true self-control. Any spirit that possesses you and takes away your control is not the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit gives godly self-control.

The Christians at Pentecost were very much in control. The Holy Spirit gave them a miraculous gift to speak in other tongues. But it was not gibberish they spoke. They spoke in actual languages, and they knew what they were doing. They spoke the truth that they knew. They testified of what they had seen and heard, exactly as Jesus had commanded them (1:8).

So let's talk a little about this day and what it means. The feast of Pentecost was a Jewish holy day long before Christians started observing it. It has its origin in the Exodus from Egypt, sometime around 1440 BC. That's when God commanded them to start observing it. It was the Jewish harvest festival (Ex. 23:16; Lev. 23:15f), so it's a little bit like our Thanksgiving. You might be thinking, "Wow, we're just now getting our crops planted. And they were celebrating the harvest already?" Yeah, they have a different crop calendar in Israel. Along with Passover and the Feast of Booths, it was one of three major feasts that Jews would travel to Jerusalem to celebrate, so there were thousands of extra people from all over the ancient world gathered in Jerusalem that day.

And this was just seven weeks after the resurrection of Jesus. Remember, Jesus was crucified on the Feast of Passover. And Pentecost always occurred fifty days after Passover, hence the name "Pentecost," which means "the fiftieth." So this is the first major event in Jerusalem since Jesus was raised from the dead. It was the first opportunity after Jesus' resurrection that there would be thousands of extra people from all over the world gathered together in Jerusalem. And the Holy Spirit used this opportunity to proclaim the mighty work of salvation that God had accomplished in Jesus Christ.

So all the disciples of Jesus, not just the Twelve, or the eleven who were left, but all who believed Jesus had been raised from the dead, were gathered together in one place (2:1). The Christian Church was not very big yet, only about 120 persons (1:15). It was small enough that they could all fit in one place. But that was about to change.

The sound of a mighty rushing wind came from heaven and filled the house where they were gathered (2:2). They were all filled with the Holy Spirit (2:4), and something unexpected happened. They all started speaking in other languages as the Holy Spirit gave them utterance (2:4).

And it created a bit of a commotion in the city. So when all these extra Jews who had come from various parts of the world heard this, they were amazed, because they were hearing the mighty works of God in their own native tongues (2:11). And this is really significant. These are people who had been born and raised in all kinds of different places, so there were at least a dozen different native languages represented, but in order to get to Jerusalem and interact with people there, travelers would have needed to know one of the three common languages spoken in Israel. Every person there would have needed to know either Latin, Greek, or Aramaic.

So in order for the Church to preach the Gospel to every person there, they only would have needed three languages. And among the few dozen Christians, they certainly would have had this covered. But the Holy Spirit desired to do something more. He was starting a powerful evangelistic movement, so he proclaimed the mighty works of God to these travelers in their mother's native tongues, the languages they had heard whispered to them when they were

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children. These were those little local languages that were only spoken in small parts of the world, far away from Jerusalem. In a special and unique way, the Holy Spirit filled the Christians and enabled them to do this, in order to draw attention to Jesus Christ and what he had done to accomplish salvation.

This is both the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy. We identify this as the gift of prophecy, because Peter says that this fulfills what God spoke through the prophet Joel, “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17). Sometimes we mistakenly think of the gift of prophecy as foretelling the future or revealing some secret knowledge. And occasionally the prophets in the Old Testament would do that. But their ordinary work of prophecy was simply to proclaim the Word of God. And here, at Pentecost, the prophecy of these Christians was that they proclaimed “the mighty works of God” (2:11). And the mighty works of God they proclaimed were the death and resurrection of Jesus. That’s what it means to prophesy.

The gift of tongues, then, is a special kind of prophecy. It’s when you proclaim the mighty works of God in a different tongue, or what we would call a different language. That’s what these Christians were doing. It wasn’t a secret heavenly language, which we would hear only as gibberish, but it was specific languages, so that these Jews from all over the ancient world could hear the mighty works of God in their own mother tongues. It wasn’t just in Aramaic, the language that Jews commonly spoke. But it was in the foreign languages of the world.

The meaning of this is that the Holy Spirit is now gathering Christians from all over the world. Salvation is not only for the Jews. These were all Jews who were gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost, but they were not saved because of their Jewishness. This was a new kind of harvest. So the Old Testament background of Pentecost as a harvest festival foreshadows what the Holy Spirit began to do at Pentecost. He began harvesting souls from every nation under heaven.

And this is really the point of Pentecost. We, of course, associate the Holy Spirit with Pentecost. But to truly understand Pentecost, we also need to rightly understand the Holy Spirit’s work. The work of the Holy Spirit is not to give us exciting experiences. The work of the Holy Spirit is to draw our hearts and minds to Jesus, because, in Jesus, we have salvation. He was crucified for our sins and raised again to give eternal life to all who call upon him.

The special gospel message for Pentecost is that God has sent his Holy Spirit to call us to faith through the Gospel, and he is given to every Christian to sanctify and preserve us in this faith, so that we will call upon Jesus in life and in death and be saved. This fulfills what God spoke through the prophet Joel: “And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21). Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.