



“Back to Basics: Where is the Holy Spirit?”

Acts 2:14-21

January 24, 2021

It’s a perennial question for those who wander and wonder, who long for that assurance and certainty that always eludes us. I’ve heard it asked in hospital rooms and church committee meetings, in corner offices and homeless shelters, at assemblies of seasoned church leaders and youth group gatherings. I’ve asked it myself when I’ve reached the limits of my own stamina and spiritual strength. In personal, familial, corporate, municipal, national, and worldwide settings. Where is God? Where is the promised Holy Spirit?

I find it oddly comforting that this is precisely the question that the disciples, these Spirit-filled saints of the Church, were asking as the Book of Acts begins. The resurrected Jesus ascends into the heavens. He has promised them a gift, a constant reminder of his presence, a Holy Spirit to guide, direct, and inspire them. But as Acts begins, there is no sign of this Spirit’s presence—how will they recognize it when he is gone?

And so, the disciples stand looking up toward heaven, where Jesus has disappeared behind the clouds, dumbfounded by all that has happened and fearful of what may come. It is at that moment that they receive the answer to their question—which comes in the form of another question. Two men in dazzling white robes—we have seen them before, outside an empty tomb—appear and ask the disciples, “Why do you stand here looking up toward heaven?” In other words, if you are looking for the Holy Spirit, you are looking in the wrong place. Maybe the lesson given to these disciples provides instruction for us as well.

You see the Book of Acts is not only, or even primarily a historical record. Its purpose is not to disinterestedly describe this early era in Christian

history but to testify, to give witness to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the real world. Acts aims to answer that troubling question—where is God?—with the stories of God’s people. That is, the powerful promise of Pentecost points forward. Always forward. Luke, the book’s author, will not let us restrict the Holy Spirit to one extraordinary morning two millennia ago. The truth proclaimed on Pentecost is that the power of God’s Spirit has been set loose in the world and its life-giving impact is not diminished by the passage of time nor is it confined to the clouds. As Jesus taught, God’s Spirit, like the wind, blows where it will. You know it by its impact.

We read this dramatic story of the birth of the church each year on Pentecost Sunday, fifty days after Easter. But this week, as I’ve prepared to preach this text out of its liturgical season, I’ve been drawn to a simple phrase in the first verse of the chapter. Luke describes how the followers of Jesus were “all together in one place.” Now recent months have given us a deeper appreciation for the gift of being together in one place, physically separated as we have been from one another in this pandemic era. And maybe Luke did mean this in the literal sense—they were all in Jerusalem, all in the same house, all in the same room.

But on this particular Sunday morning in our time and place, I’m reading a bit more into this image of togetherness. The disciples were together—they were united in heart and mind—and the Holy Spirit met them in that togetherness. Their unity enabled the Spirit’s presence—or at least their awareness of it.

So too in our worship and our work, we must strive to be together in one place. Not in the same building but on the common ground of God’s grace. When we are divided, the result is not only

the fracture of the body of Christ but also the compromising of our mission in the world. We are called to be a people transcending worldly distinctions in order to demonstrate divine unity. This is not optional work for those who follow Jesus. It is core to our common call.

In this Pentecostal scene, Luke paints the picture of a church that refuses to allow human divisions to outweigh our identity as children of God. The section we omitted from Acts 2 this morning contains a carefully constructed catalogue of cultural classifications. And here's what you need to know about the list. Many of these groups were deeply divided from each other; some were outright enemies at the time of these events. The power of Pentecost, Luke insists, is that when we are together, the Spirit of God transcends entrenched division. Jew and Roman. Parthian and Cretan. All together in one place. And when this happens, the Holy Spirit is there. Their testimony is this truth. The Spirit of God is still moving, still stirring, still guiding and directing, still opening hearts and minds to Gospel truth—whenever we are together, truly together. For those of us who trust that the Spirit of God is with us when we embody this divine unity rather than discord and division, the challenge is to make that truth concrete in our actions, giving tangible witness, through practices of compassion, justice, mercy, and love.

Where do we begin? Let's return for a moment to the text, to that vision of Pentecost. Those tongues of fire that gave the disciples the ability to speak in other languages. It's an extraordinary, miraculous gift. But if we focus solely on the gift of speech, we might miss the essential corresponding gift. Understanding. Luke tells us that the curious crowd was astonished that they were able to hear one another in their own language. They could understand each other. Imagine the transformative impact of this gift of the Spirit. The divisions of our time are so great, so deeply embedded, that we seem to speaking different in different tongues. Even when we use the same words, their meanings diverge. We need a new language.

Dialogue requires both the gift of speech and the gift of understanding.

What if we began with honest, vulnerable listening? What if we seek understanding, not point-scoring? What if our ears and hearts are open to the possibility of learning something from one another? What if we pray for the Spirit's guidance in crafting new language that might inspire and unite us?

When Peter stands to deliver his Pentecost sermon, the pressure is on. Some observing this event are already suspicious—maybe it's all a show; maybe they're drunk. But Peter has another explanation. Observing the extraordinary diversity of the crowd, he recalls the words of the prophet Joel, who spoke of a time when God's Spirit would be poured out on all flesh. When all of God's people would see the Spirit in action. The young would see visions. The old would dream dreams. A powerful vision of hopeful unity. This, Peter says, is what you are witnessing. A community called to stand apart by holding together. What might it mean for us?

I am deeply aware of the difference that exists among us in this community of Christian faith. I hear your voices and your diverse perspectives. I know that we do not share a uniform set of convictions on every difficult challenge or contentious topic. Like the crowd that gathered on Pentecost morning, there is much that separates us as individuals, much on which we disagree.

Here's a little secret—I knew that when I came to serve as your pastor 968 days ago. This reality was a part of my discernment process; I genuinely wondered whether the Spirit that draws us together could be stronger than the forces that tear us apart, whether you would choose unity when division is simply easier. I am here because I believe that the witness of a congregation that does not find its unity in rigidly imposed dogma or a set of political convictions is essential for God's work in the world today. I am here because I really do believe that the community formed by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost

is called to be different, and that this difference is our witness to the world. If we allow ourselves to be defined by human categories or distinctions, we leave no room for the Spirit's challenging and transforming presence. We are defined by the love of God and by Christ's command to love one another.

We got a picture of this at Tuesday evening's session meeting, when we heard a first report of our Task Force on Race and Welcome. This team has been crafting a vision for our congregation to practice welcome for all, confront the sin of racial injustice, and work toward equity in our church and our community. As we listened to the testimony of members of this task force and their challenge to us, I was struck by the distinctive language they used and the essential questions they asked. It was the language of faithfulness, courage, grace, and authenticity. They were questions of how we might more intentionally demonstrate the marks of genuine welcome. How do our ministries honor the image of God in each person who comes through our doors? Are there standards or practices that might ostracize others? What does inclusion ask of us, and where does it challenge us? I thought of those disciples gathered on Pentecost, where they received the message that we discover the Holy Spirit's presence not when our gaze is fixed on the heavens but when we open our eyes to our neighbors who bear God's image.

I am aware of the criticism that an emphasis on unity can lead to lukewarm faith or drain the passion from our commitment to evangelism on the one hand or to social justice on the other. I'm aware of it, but I don't believe it. The early Christians filled with the Holy Spirit and on fire for Christ's mission found their unity in passionately pursuing God's way. They preached the transformative power of the Gospel promise of life abundant. They cared for the most vulnerable in their community. They advocated for those who were left out or marginalized. They sacrificed comfort to meet the needs of others. They followed the Spirit's call that expanded their vision for inclusion and welcome as the church grew

broader and bolder. The Early Church found its God-given purpose in turning to the presence of God in the world. They were given a new identity. United by a common future. Joined in ministry and mission. Renewed vision. Shared responsibility.

This is our work. To passionately pursue the way of Christ because of who God is, who God calls us to be, where the Spirit leads us. Second Presbyterian Church—we have a powerful voice to offer, the potential for purpose-filled leadership, the capacity to lift others up, the call to convene. We do that best when we speak the language of faith, pray for the gift of understanding, listen to voices long silenced, and advocate for life abundant for all God's children. Our unity is our witness to the world, our proclamation of the life-changing truth. The Holy Spirit is here. Amen.