

“The Prodigal Spirit”

Acts 2:1-13

Pentecost

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“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they began to speak other languages...”

Acts 2:4a

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, may the Spirit of Pentecost come and fill us with new life that we may fulfill the mission of your Son Jesus Christ in the world. Amen.

Message

The title of this sermon may need some explanation. Most people know the story of the Prodigal Son in the Gospel of Luke. It is the story of young man who goes out from his father’s house to a far country. Having wasted his inheritance, he returns home, where his father rushes out to embrace him and welcome him back (Luke 15:11-32).¹

A similar storyline emerges with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, in the creation of the church. That is to say, in the Book of Acts, there is a larger story of how the Father sends the Son into the far country. The Son goes back to the embrace of the Father, to the love that flows from the Father’s heart, but not after creating a community of forgiveness.²

Therefore, to say that the Holy Spirit is “prodigal” is to say that the Holy Spirit is that *personal bond of lavish and extravagant love that the Father has for his Son and for us*. The Holy Spirit binds the Father and the Son together, with us – in mutual love, forgiving us and redeeming us.

What happens on Pentecost is how the Spirit comes upon a group of ragtag disciples to lavish upon them the love of the Father and ignite them for mission,

¹ The title of this sermon comes from the book by Graham Tomlin entitled *The Prodigal Spirit: The Trinity, the Church, and the Future of the World* (London, UK: Alpha International Holy Trinity Brompton, 2011), 9-10.

² Ibid., 22-23.

with the very presence and power of Christ, as they then go into all the far countries of the world. That is Pentecost!

Crash Course

But if we are truly to understand Pentecost, we need to know a little bit more about the Holy Spirit. Indeed, if we were to have a crash course in the person and work of the Holy Spirit, we would want to mention several key points.

First, we would also want to begin the story in Genesis when “God created the heavens and the earth and the earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light, and there was light’” (Genesis 1:1-3). The Spirit of God was present in creation at the very beginning.

Later in Genesis, of course, we read that God breathes life, or the spirit, into all living things and creatures (1:4-2-5), and in Exodus the Spirit goes before the people of Israel in the wilderness as a pillar of cloud, guiding them to freedom (Exodus 13:21-22). But the Spirit also comes to the prophet Elijah as a “still small voice” and as “clashes of thunder” (1 Kings 19:11-12); in addition, the Spirit acts as a Shepherd to Israel when it goes into exile to comfort and assure (Psalm 23).

Now let us move to the New Testament where the Holy Spirit conceives Jesus in Mary’s womb (Luke 1:31) and descends upon Jesus as a dove at his baptism (Luke 3:22). The Spirit even leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted (Luke 4:1-11).

In our passage today, the Spirit also descends and comes upon the disciples as “the sound of a violent wind and flaming tongues of fire” (Acts 2:2). There is power associated with the work of the Holy Spirit.

Indeed, in Paul’s Letter to the Romans, the power of the Spirit is such that there is nothing that can separate us from it; there is nowhere we can go to escape God’s power and presence, even in death, as that same Spirit resurrects Jesus from the dead and lives in us (Psalms 139, Romans 8:11, Romans 8:31-39).

But note something very important: the Holy Spirit does not come as some ambiguous thing, but as a personal presence, as the Third Person of the Trinity, the Spirit is the One who gives us the relational understanding to know who Jesus is as Lord and what God is up to in saving this world (1 Cor. 12:3). In other words, when we speak of the Holy Spirit, we are not speaking about a “what” but a

“who.”³ The Holy Spirit is a person who brings us together in communion, in relationship. Wherever two or three people gather in Christ’s name, the Spirit is there as the One who is relating or building up (Matthew 18:20).

This is what the Holy Spirit does and who the Spirit is, giving us the gifts to us to build up the church as a community for service, for worship (1 Cor. 12:4-11), as well as bringing out in us the fruit to demonstrate Jesus’ own character (Galatians 5:25-26).

We could share more, but that is the Reader’s Digest version! The point is that when the Holy Spirit comes there is life, not death; there is generosity, not greed; there is self-giving love, not a self-serving or a defensive ego.

Pentecost

Therefore, on Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit comes as the Prodigal Spirit, there is a lavish or extravagant love poured out upon the disciples, with new life, new power, new energy, new understanding, a new embrace –all to undo the deadly effects of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). Remember that it was in the story of the Tower of Babel where people who thought they had godlike power tried to unify everyone under one imperial language and culture, but God opposed such uniformity and voted for diversity in language and culture.⁴

Pentecost is the Spirit’s answer to reverse that uniformity, or that moment when God sends a message about what true power, and communication, and presence mean.

- a. Power in that we do not control the Spirit; no, the Spirit blows where the Spirit wills. We cannot put God into our own political boxes (John 3:8).
- b. Second, it is about communication in that Pentecost is about how people from different backgrounds communicate and understand each other. One of the miracles of Pentecost is that people communicated with each other in their own language (Acts 2:5). Think about that: think about how, at any time, when we understand each other, even in our own language, a miracle is taking place. That is one of the gifts of the Spirit.

³ Fleming Rutledge, *The Bible and The New York Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company Inc., 1998), 164.

⁴ Brian D. McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation* (New York, NY: Jericho Books, 2014), 205.

- c. And third: Pentecost is about presence: We are not the generators of the Spirit. God is. We are not the creators of the church. The Spirit is. The Spirit comes as a presence that is recognizable and perceptible, as we see the life-giving effects of God's Presence in our lives.

Now that is quite a bit to digest, but let us consider how the Spirit is still working in our world to undo Babel and more. Think of how the Spirit is always trying to bridge the gaps in communication between different people and groups, or even in families, when folks misinform and miscommunicate with each other. The Spirit is seeking true communication.

Or look at how the Spirit is trying to move churches and denominations of all stripes to receive the fire of Christ's passion for the ice of self-righteousness and blame (Ezekiel 37).

Or notice how the peace of the Spirit is trying to capture our attention and imagination by reminding us of Christ's way of wisdom in a land blunted by senseless acts of violence, day after day.

Babel is what *we* get when *we* are not willing to listen to or receive from the Holy Spirit wisdom and love; it what we get when we won't receive what the Spirit is saying through others not like us; that is what we would call bigotry. That is, Babel is what we get when we act in ways that are petty and judgmental, hostile, self-promoting. Pentecost, on the other hand, is what the Spirit does to undo all that, as when we receive the Holy Spirit or as when we consent to the Spirit's mission of mutual embrace.

Mission Possible!

In fact, the other day, while Peggy and I were on vacation, we watched one of the many sequels of Mission Impossible with Tom Cruise, the one where the tape says, "Ethan, this mission is for you, should you choose to accept it."

Well, the mission of the church is possible because of the Holy Spirit, should we, of course accept the Spirit!

Our Faith Promise Mission Campaign is just one sign of this: of how we can participate in the Spirit's mission to bear witness to Christ, to undo the effects of sin. At its core, Faith Promise is nothing less than putting into action the love and fire of the Spirit – together. After all, we all are in the same boat, so to speak. We all are in our own upper rooms waiting for the Spirit to come.

Indeed, when Peggy and I took the ferryboat to Mackinaw Island, I became keenly aware of how we all are in the same boat together: people from all “walks of life,” from all different parts of the country, if not the world, were all in the same boat.

And I thought to myself: “You know, if we all leaned too far to the right, we would be in trouble, and if we all leaned too far to the left, we would be in trouble. But if we all listened to the Captain, if we all paid attention, we would find ways of moving forward.”

Throughout history, the church has often viewed itself as a boat, tossed to and fro, to be sure, but always guided by the Spirit of Christ. That boat is what we sail in now, with the winds of the Spirit blowing us toward our mission to grow and care.

Are you – are we – ready to make that commitment to share in this mission, to go into the far places of this community? To support the work of others around the world? To make disciples? To work for justice and peace? To share compassion? To bear fruit?

The Spirit, of course, blows where the Spirit blows in extravagant and lavish ways. Our prayer is that the Spirit will blow and come upon you as well to fulfill Christ’s mission. Amen.