

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12; Mark 16

Our readings this morning are of the miraculous acts of Jesus and the apostles, especially following Jesus' resurrection and the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and where Peter spoke and those who listened could understand in their own language. The Holy Spirit, on that day, bestowed gifts upon the disciples. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:

<sup>8</sup> *For to one is given a word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another a word of knowledge by the same Spirit, <sup>9</sup> to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, <sup>10</sup> to another [miraculous powers], to another prophecy, to another distinguishing of spirits, to another kinds of tongues, to another interpretation of tongues.<sup>1</sup>*

Mark 16 adds to those gifts, also called *charisms*, (thus the word *Charismatic*) saying

<sup>17</sup> *And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will expel demons, they will speak in new tongues, <sup>18</sup> they will pick up snakes. And if they drink any deadly poison it will never hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick and [they will get] well.<sup>2</sup>*

The question arises,

*why aren't these things happening now?*

Or, *why can't I speak in tongues or prophesy or discern spirits?*

Or, even more so, *why can't I handle venomous snakes, or drink poison and live, or lay hands on the sick and heal them?*

These are good questions, and we would not be good modern people if we did not also add that they are very weird questions. Christianity is, if nothing else, a very strange and weird thing, is it not?

If we accept the miraculous in Scripture, or at least give some credence to the miraculous at all, why would we not give heed to it now, in our faith lives today?

Why isn't the miraculous available to us now? The traditional Protestant answer is that the miracles of the New Testament were signs for unbelievers in that day, and the signs of the Holy Spirit ended when the disciples died. The miraculous acts of the apostles are not transferrable to the believers who came after them.

The rejection of the charisms of the Holy Spirit was the prevailing way of thinking in the Catholic and Protestant world. Even so, there have always been Charismatics in the Christian church - people or groups of people who experience the above gifts of the Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, W. H., III, Ritzema, E., Brannan, R., Mangum, D., Dunham, J., Reimer, J. A., & Wierenga, M. (Eds.). (2012). [The Lexham English Bible](#) (1 Co 12:8–10). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

<sup>2</sup> Harris, W. H., III, Ritzema, E., Brannan, R., Mangum, D., Dunham, J., Reimer, J. A., & Wierenga, M. (Eds.). (2012). [The Lexham English Bible](#) (Mk 16:17–18). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

There have been occasional sanctioned allowances for some restricted activity of the Holy Spirit, such as during the First Awakening back in the 1740s in America. Then, the sign of the Holy Spirit was known as *being slain in the Spirit*. The hearer of the Word would be so overcome by the truth of the preached Word that he would shake and his eyes would roll back and he would cry out for salvation.

With John Wesley, the possible expressions of the presence of the Holy Spirit in church widened. Wesley called one's realization or recognition of the gifts of the Spirit "*the second blessing*". Remember last week when I read to you about the Holy Spirit from the Confession of Faith of the United Methodist Church? Then, I mentioned that the Holiness movement within the Methodist tradition took the statement about the Holy Spirit and our whole, or entire, sanctification very seriously.

In 1900, a Holiness minister who ran the Bethel Bible College in Topeka, Kansas named Charles Fox Parham<sup>3</sup> started a prayer group around his study of speaking in tongues. Parham believed that gifts of the Holy Spirit were always confirmed by signs of those gifts. Or, to put it another way, faith will express itself through the Scripturally referenced gifts of the Holy Spirit.

On New Year's Day, 1901, a woman in the prayer group experienced what today's Pentecostals call '*an anointing*', or more traditionally, '*the second blessing*' after much prayer for a sign of the Spirit. She started speaking in Chinese. She spoke only Chinese for 3 days.

Immediately following this experience, Parham and his students went around the central Midwest and told people of the event. The new Pentecost story spread quickly. Parham opened a new school in Houston, Texas.

There, one of his students was William J. Seymour, an African-American who took Parham's bible school to Asuza, California. Seymour's school grew quickly and, in 1905, another Pentecostal experience descended upon the students at Asuza. People experienced healings, prophecies were spoken and came true, people spoke in tongues and people interpreted those tongues, spirits were discerned and exorcised. The awakening spread like wildfire throughout the West, into the South, and then up the coasts.

The early Pentecostal movement was very attractive in impoverished communities, whether in the cities or in rural areas. Before there were separate Pentecostal churches, the movement manifested in traditional churches, which terrified parishioner and pastor alike. Pentecostal churches formed very quickly and there was very little organization to them. Associations, or assemblies, would form and splinter quickly.

Rejected as heretical by mainstream churches, there was no external support for the new movement.

People dancing in the aisles, speaking in tongues, laying hands onto sick people, yelling during the service, prophesying...it was too much for most traditional church people. Worse, these new Pentecostal converts took very seriously Peter's vision that "*God makes no distinctions of persons*".

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<sup>3</sup> My primary source for the story of the Pentecostal movement comes from *A Charismatic Reader: The Holy Spirit in Today's Church* by Erlin Jorstad. Book 2 in a collection of 4 books put together by the Religious Book Club, NY. ©1974; and also the Wikipedia page on Pentecostalism found at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pentecostalism#History>.

Women and men were preaching in churches. Blacks and whites worshiped together with young and old, rich and poor, but especially poor. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century America, the age of Jim Crow and women's suffrage, was not equipped to deal with Spirit-inspired equality.

One of the organizations that formed out of all this was the Assemblies of God, formed by 13 white pastors, which is significant because the larger Pentecostal movement started and was led by a black man. Even so, by the 1930s, the Pentecostal movement almost died out because it was so fractured and disorganized.

Let's reflect for a moment on our historical review of Christian movements:

We started with the Catholic Church – a highly structured and organized top-down approach.

Then we looked at the Orthodox Church, which was still highly structured but less top-down and more regional and ethnic.

Then we looked at the Anglican/Episcopal Church, which is also a top-down structure and very state-oriented.

Then we came to Luther and the Reformation. Authority was no longer located in an organization, but instead in Scripture. Further, the individual's conscience in interpretation had great importance. So now we have moved into individual churches organizing with other individual churches which share a similar interpretation of Scripture.

This is the state of the Reformation. Pretty much everything we have looked at since Luther resembles what I just said in one form or another. Scripture or the institution holds the authority.

But with the Pentecostal movement, where does authority lay?

Authority here lays in the individual experience of the Holy Spirit as manifested in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This is a very difficult place to build an organization from, and by the 1930s, it almost disappeared, except for the Assembly of God church.

Even so, the Pentecostal movement survived, especially in economically dispossessed areas after the Depression. Pentecostalism creates communities where there should be communities. Disempowered people thrive when they have shared experiences and a sense of community. This is what Pentecostalism did and does for people.

The more disempowered a group of people were the more extreme the Pentecostal signs became. The best example of this is in Appalachia where, in the 1920's and 1930's, people started taking Mark 16 very seriously and, by the 1970s, started handling snakes (see also the story of Paul and a snake in Acts 28) and drinking poison.

Because of the Pentecostals' literal belief in scripture and the scriptural belief that the Holy Spirit provides all truth to those who believe, there was no need to be educated. Literacy mattered, but education did not. Jesus said the Holy Spirit would lead us into all Truth, so any learning other than that which comes from the Holy Spirit is an affront to the Holy Spirit. If you woke up with the call of the Spirit upon you, you could be preaching by that afternoon in the community church, no matter if you were young or old, black or white, male or female.

Pentecostalism centered the community, in the inner city, in rural areas, or in Appalachia. There were all kinds of problems due to poverty in Appalachia and there still are, but one of the problems those

Pentecostal snake-handling communities did not have child and spousal abuse. We could say the Holy Spirit formed them into loving communities of faith which confirmed their faith through the signs of the Spirit. Rapacious mining and drugs have changed much of that now.

Modern day Pentecostalism was resurrected by the advent of television when people like Benny Hinn and especially Oral Roberts were able to modernize Pentecostal worship en masse. Pentecostalism since the 1950s has spread quickly, to the point where the Pentecostal (or Charismatic) movement has appeared in many different denominations including Catholicism. The Pentecostal movement then is both within traditional churches, and also its own thing. Pentecostalism does not discriminate amongst peoples and now Pentecostalism is one of the largest expressions of Christianity in the world.

## WORSHIP

In a Pentecostal church, you will likely experience a freewheeling unstructured non-ordered faith-filled free-for-all. You'd begin with singing, and the singing maybe will lead the gathered people into prayer. The sermon takes as long as it takes, and is comprised mainly of the minister opening the bible and extemporaneously talking.

And during any of these things, people may get up to testify to the Spirit or they may exhibit signs of the Spirit (speaking in tongues, rolling on the floor, prophecy, handling snakes, etc.)

If there's any structure to the service at all, it probably begins with music and ends with music, and the service takes as long as it takes: it could be an hour and 20 minutes or it could be three hours.

## THEOLOGY

Pentecostals do not prioritize theological thought in their movement. The theology rotates around two significant ideas:

- the inerrancy of Scripture (meaning that all truth is contained within Scripture and there is no error in scripture) and,
- the Holy Spirit manifests here and now in this world through signs (the gifts of the spirit)

Pentecostals see themselves as a continuation of the Book of Acts. Essentially, the followers of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit are writing the Third Testament of the Bible now, today.

For the Pentecostal believer, the Day of Pentecost never ended, but simply expanded and grew. The flame of the Spirit that came upon the disciples in the room in Jerusalem is the same flame that can fall upon you or me in whatsoever way the Holy Spirit chooses.

The goal of Pentecostal worship and theology and structure and spiritual disciplines is the receiving of the Second Blessing, to get to the point where each person receives and is empowered by the gift of the Holy Spirit (speaking in tongues, prophecy, healing, handling snakes, not getting burned by blowtorches, extreme strength, immunity to poison, prophesy, interpretation, etc.)

If there's a theological gist that's common across Pentecostal boundaries, it is the idea that the strength of one's faith determines the power of the Holy Spirit moving through you. An example of this is the Name It and Claim It movement, which says, for instance, with Janis Joplin, "*O Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz*". My capacity to allow the Spirit of the Lord to move through me determines the outcome.

It is why I do not have a Mercedes Benz.

## STRUCTURE

The structure of a Pentecostal church is very fluid.

Authority will often go to the pastor and the leaders/elders of the church. Membership in many Pentecostal churches is dependent on you showing a sign or gift of the Holy Spirit, though that is changing as more and more people come into the movement. There are a plethora of assemblies, associations, and organizations in the Pentecostal movement, all different flavors and aspects of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

## MISSIONS

When Pentecostals go to other parts of the world, they believe they are bringing the opportunity of the Second Blessing to those places in the world. Remember, the Holy Spirit empowers people and the message a Pentecostal missionary will bring is one of empowerment by way of the Holy Spirit. There are a LOT of Pentecostal missionaries but not many Pentecostal mission organizations.

## SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

The spiritual disciplines of the Pentecostal movement are dependent on whatever the expression of the Holy Spirit may be within you: music, drawing, painting, dance, singing, etc. The arts are very important in Pentecostal churches. The question always is how will I find opportunities for the Holy Spirit to express through me and others.

People from the outside look at the Pentecostal movement and see a lot wrong with it, precisely because of the Mercedes Benz example, or snake-handlers.

But perhaps rather than seeing it as an individual receiving nice things or doing wild acts, maybe we can take a cue from the most extreme expression of the movement and give some credence to our Appalachian brothers and sisters, the snake-handlers.

Pentecostalism is mostly about the community praying for the empowerment of one another in every aspect of their lives by way of the Holy Spirit.

And if that is what's going on, then the movement is a great teaching for the entire Christian community.

Empowering people to rise above the tragedy of this life and receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit is a powerful, disruptive way to be in the world. How do we know such a thing is possible for us?

Because Jesus tells us it's possible, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

*O Lord, Your Holy Spirit finds a way through the cracks and broken things of this world and enlivens our hearts, minds, souls, and Creation itself through your light and power. Empower us to be open to the Holy Spirit in such a way that your love and peace and provision spreads to neighbor, friend and enemy alike so that your love and peace may be known to all people, in such a way that your Kingdom may be known now and everywhere. In the name of Jesus Christ and in the power of your Holy Spirit, now and always, Amen.*