

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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May 31, 2009
Pentecost
Acts 2:1-21

The Spirit for the World

This is one of my very favorite Bible stories. Maybe yours, too?

One of the reasons I love it is that I don't understand it. It has many layers and it's mystical, full of language seeking to describe the indescribable. Every time I read it, I notice something I didn't notice before. Every time I try to picture it, the image is a little bit different. It's mysterious and intriguing and awe-inspiring.

Kind of like the Holy Spirit.

There they were, Peter, James, John, Andrew, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, Jesus' brothers, Mary the mother of Jesus—and others, women who are not named but whose presence is noted by the Bible. There they were, grieving, dispirited, without direction. Jesus was gone. Yes, they'd seen him resurrected, they believed in the resurrection—but now he was gone again. What were they to do without him? Peter was taking the leadership role, really more of a maintenance role because about all they could accomplish was filing a vacancy on the board of disciples. Headquarters was an upstairs room. That's where they gathered to pray.

And then something strange and wonderful happened on the day we remember as Pentecost. Wind, and fire, and Spirit swept into the upstairs room and swept them out of hiding onto the streets. Tongues of fire became tongues of speech, and suddenly what came out of their mouths was something that all the strangers on the street from every part of the known world could understand. And the only explanation that made sense was that God was intervening in history, God was there among them, God was in the tongues and spirits of these Jesus-followers and God was doing a new thing for the world through them.

They were learning to share their faith—boldly, courageously, publicly.

Sharing Faith—hey, I've heard that phrase before! Isn't that one of the themes of the Journey of Renewal proposal. Yeah, it is! Sharing Faith! It's #2, after the first one, "Learning Love." Learning love, sharing faith. You heard me speak about "learning love" a couple of weeks ago. Guess what--you're going to hear more about the other two on other weeks, but this week the focus is on Sharing Faith.

Because sharing faith is the work of the Holy Spirit in Christian disciples. It's not the only work, but it is clearly an imperative of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Just as love isn't love if it's hoarded, faith isn't faith if we're afraid to share it. Faith trumps fear. Sharing faith is what we have to do with it, if we have it.

So today I hope to connect our Journey of Renewal "sharing faith" theme with our Journey of Renewal hospitality goals, and allow the Pentecost story to illumine how we might get there. For I do believe that it is by the Holy Spirit that the church grows, and the Spirit is given for the world.

Okay, maybe you're thinking "is this really something that we Presbyterians can do?" Maybe you've heard of that unnamed Presbyterian church where one Sunday a man began to be moved by the Spirit, making him shout out, "Amen!" People around him were

a little disturbed. But the Spirit moved him further, and louder still he said, "Hallelujah! Praise Jesus!" By now quite a few people were looking over their shoulders and shifting in their seats to see a n usher quickly moving down the aisle. The usher bent over and whispered to the man, "Sir! Control yourself!" But the man exclaimed, "I can't help it. I got religion!!!" To which the usher responded, "Well, you didn't get it here!"

Maybe you're thinking that being filled with the Spirit and sharing faith just aren't Presbyterian. Thank you very much. You never wanted to be like one of those over-the-top Christians who can't talk about anything else but religion, or one of those button-holing evangelistic types who try to convert everyone.

Well, I have no desire to fit one of those caricatures, either. But it's way too easy for us to hide behind our reserve, keep our faith personal and private, and never let on that Jesus Christ is alive for us and in us. It's way too easy to say, "I'll let my faith show in my actions," and never say a word that lets others know of the joy that lies inside us. It's way, way too easy to say "evangelism is a spiritual gift that I just don't have," and let someone else (we hope) do it.

The Pentecost message is that prayer in community calls the Holy Spirit to be present, and Holy Spirit is all that is needed to loosen the tongues of Christian disciples, for the sake of the world.

The Spirit does move among Presbyterians, and faith is shared in some unlikely places. Jerry Swanson is a Presbyterian minister in northeastern Montana, ministering in the Dakota Presbytery with native people. One of the churches he serves is the Makaicu Presbyterian Church in Riverside, Montana, near Brockton. A few summers ago, a sudden windstorm took the roof of the church and wrecked the trailers of several families in that small community on the Ft. Peck reservation. We gave some money to fix the church roof and help those families. This past Easter, Jerry baptized 13 people at the Makaicu church, in a service attended by over 100 people. Then he went to Red Eagle Memorial Presbyterian Church in Ft. Kipp for 2 baptisms. Next stop was the church in Chelsea, which has been closed for many years. But it was open this year, and Jerry baptized 15 more people there before going to the United Dakota Church in Wolf Point to baptize a set of triplets! The church in Chelsea, which is too small to be on the Montana map, is being rededicated this morning, Pentecost Sunday, as it officially re-opens. Jerry called me this week to ask for prayers for the church. I promised that we would pray for the Chelsea church. But think about it—a ministry of 33 baptisms in one day, in one of the most sparsely populated areas of ths country?! The Holy Spirit is there. Poverty and isolation and oppression—or as Jerry says, "broken treaties, broken homes, and broken lives"—call loudly for the healing presence of Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God," and many Dakota people are ready to receive God's blessing. Now, in the year of our Lord 2009.

Holy Spirit moves among Presbyterians here, too. Several years ago the Spirit moved among us to see that our stewardship of Rockhaven Camp wasn't going far enough, that we had in our care a jewel to share with others. Rockhaven, a place of peace and God's presence, became the locus of an amazing outreach ministry to area children. If you were here on Youth Sunday, you heard testimonies of how young people became disciples of Jesus Christ at Rockhaven through the sharing of faith they experienced there. It's still

happening. Rockhaven is still an instrument of outreach and ministry, where people of all ages can experience God's unconditional love and presence. It's not automatic—someone has to say something about Jesus at Rockhaven, to communicate the love and power of God in their life. To testify. But this ministry is about much, much more than getting kids to have a positive outdoor experience. It's about experiencing the freedom and joy of Christian community. It's about saying, no, we are not drunk on new wine, we are changed because God has come into our lives with power and vision, hope and new life. We children and youth and adults do something at Rockhaven not to buttonhole or convert them, but so that we can share faith in Jesus Christ with them.

And even closer to home, Holy Spirit moves among this worshiping congregation on Sunday mornings and through the week. When we returned from our sabbatical in January, we discovered that sabbatical supply pastor Linda Loving had done exactly what we asked her to do, to share her rich experience in teaching hospitality as a Christian spiritual practice. In February, we commissioned about 30 people to officially serve as "hospitality hosts," and place the welcoming of guests at the front of their minds when they came to worship, second only to God. It is my belief that when we do that, we are living more like Jesus. These are anxious times we live in, and one of the greatest threats of anxious times is a siege mentality, a circling of the wagons to protect what we already have. A retreat to an upstairs room while the world is bustling around on the streets below. But having hospitality as our mission turns our attention outwards, to face the way Jesus asks us to face—towards the world. It takes us out of the security of our clubhouse, our safe haven, to meet people where they are and share faith with them. Maybe you're thinking, "what would I say to someone I've never met before?" Here's what the Pentecost story testifies to us: the Holy Spirit will provide the words. And what could be easier than starting with those who walk through our doors on their own volition—they've already put aside their fears to enter an unknown place, where an unknown people meet. They must be seeking something!

So here it is—the Pentecost good news for a people who want to know how to share faith:

Holy Spirit is given to Christian disciples, and Holy Spirit empowers us to share faith in Jesus Christ with the world. With this gift, we can join God's mission of welcoming others to live in the peace, joy, freedom and truth of Christ. It's not a gimmick or a technique or a strategy, it is the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

So-the Spirit is not just for the club, the insiders, those who already know of God's power and love in Jesus Christ. Like everything else in the church, the Spirit is for the blessing of the world—the whole world.

Come, Holy Spirit, come!