

**“Church, Wind, and Fire!”**  
© 2009 Rev. James L. Perry, Jr.  
East Cobb United Methodist Church  
May 31, 2009

Scripture: Acts 2:1-21  
Prayer

Andrew Kinsey sent his 75 year old father a birthday card. It had a lovely New England fishing village scene with two boats on it – one a sailboat and the other a rowboat. His father had always been a practical thinker and had lived a simple life, so Kinsey wrote a little note in the card asking which boat his father would take if he had the choice. Several weeks later, he received this response from his father, "I noticed that the rowboat had no motor, but that the sailboat had a sail. My question, before making a decision, is there any wind?" Is there any power there?

If your iPod or portable DVD player quits, you know what to do. If your flashlight no longer shines brightly, you look for new batteries immediately. If your car does not run properly, you look for someone to fix it. You would never expect to get light from an unplugged lamp or an internet connection from a computer that is not attached to either a network or a modem and a power source. It's amazing to me that we live in a time when so many things require power to work properly. Yet we have somehow convinced ourselves that we can get along just fine without the Pentecostal power God intended us to have to be what he made us to be. It's like the more power we have in the things we control, the less we see the need for God's power. We empower ourselves with our technology and gadgets. (Never mind any recognition of who gave us the insight to invent and use these things in the first place!)

It is embarrassing sometimes how little the modern day Church resembles the Church on that first Pentecost. The sound of a windstorm, tongues of fire, disciples speaking in different languages, thousands being added to the church and lots of excitement. When the church is alive and well, people are continually being changed.

### **Pentecost – The Baptism of the Holy Spirit**

The Holy Spirit was always there as a manifestation of God's presence – an equal part of the Trinity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit did not appear for the first time at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit was there at creation. The Holy Spirit spoke to the prophets. It descended upon Jesus at his baptism. The scriptural account today is a fulfillment of John the Baptist's words in Luke 3:16. Three years earlier, he had predicted, "One mightier than I is coming. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." The prophet Joel had predicted the day when the Holy Spirit would not longer be experienced selectively but would in fact be poured out on all flesh. (Joel 2:28-29). That prophecy was quoted by Peter in his sermon in Acts 2:17-21.

On the day of Pentecost about 120 followers of Jesus gathered in an upper room as was their custom. They were excited because they had seen the risen Christ. But they were also confused, troubled, and timid. They were meeting behind closed doors for fear of the Jews. They had become accustomed to just meeting and waiting. But the wait is over! On Pentecost, all flesh was empowered, and we no longer have the luxury of just gathering in our room "as is our custom." Because of Pentecost, we are empowered to be more and do more, and more is expected of us as a result.

On the day of Pentecost the sound of a violent wind suddenly filled their house and the surrounding area. If you have ever been around a hurricane or tornado, you know how

violent wind can sound. In Hebrew the word for wind and spirit is the same. That mighty wind of the Spirit blew from them the cobwebs of fear and uncertainty. Then came an empowering rush of confidence, faith, and joy.

The disciples saw divided tongues of fire flickering above each of them. Fire symbolizes God's purifying presence, burning away the undesirable elements of our lives and setting our hearts aflame to ignite the lives of others. The hearts of the disciples were set on fire with love for Christ, and with a burning desire to tell the story. Remember the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35? After they had heard all that Jesus shared with them – and they still did not get it – he disappeared from their sight. One of them commented, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening up the scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32).

The official symbol of the United Methodist Church is a cross and a Pentecostal flame – two flames actually – symbolizing the two churches that came together in 1968 to form the United Methodist Church. Our symbol includes the flame of the Spirit. Our mission is to tell and live a cross-centered gospel, empowered and taught by the Holy Spirit. Our founder John Wesley said, "The renewal of the soul, after the image of God...can never be wrought in us except by the power of the Holy Spirit." Wesley also said of his preaching, "I set myself on fire and people come to watch me burn." Is the Spirit so real in your life that you feel the excitement – the burning if you will – of the message of the gospel?

### **The Holy Spirit Changes Things**

On the day of Pentecost the disciples threw open those closed doors they had been hiding behind. They poured out into the streets. A crowd had already gathered, drawn by the sound of that mighty wind. Then the disciples were suddenly enabled by the Spirit to speak the languages of all those foreigners in the crowd. Each person heard a special delivery message in his or her own language.

Just consider the changes. The fearful became fearless. Facing the very same Jewish Council which had condemned Jesus, Simon Peter indicted them all for executing Jesus. When the Council warned the disciples not to teach in Jesus' name, Simon Peter replied, "We must obey God rather than men." Those disciples stood, refusing to be intimidated. The disciples who earlier had been silent began to shout the gospel. When persecution forced them out of Jerusalem, they just told the story over a wider area. The great missionary to India, E. Stanley Jones, was fond of saying, "Without the Holy Spirit, I'm a mess. With the Holy Spirit I'm a message!" At Pentecost God entrusted the Gospel to a motley crew so obviously underqualified that anybody with common sense would know that the power came from God.

### **Needing A Refill?**

If you are not filled, you are empty. No compromises allowed here. A lot of well-meaning church folks are attempting to do a lot of good things, but they are trying to do it in their own power. They are spiritually empty. Ask God to fill you with the Holy Spirit every day. In Ephesians 5:18, Paul says, "Be filled with the Spirit." Those who are filled with the Holy Spirit are those who crave it, who are willing to change anything the Lord requires, who are willing to serve as the Lord commands. We should not live a single day without being reenergized by the present power of God.

A few years ago in the Rose Bowl Parade in Pasadena, a float stalled. Frustration increased quickly because other floats could not move in this nationally televised event. Mechanics quickly surveyed the stalled float, searching for the problem. Finally,

someone had the presence of mind to check for fuel. That's right. It was out of gas. This became even more embarrassing when the crowd realized that this float's sponsor was one of the major oil companies. Is the Body of Christ – the Church – running on spiritual empty? Are you?

### **Share Your Holy Spirit Experiences**

As we share with each other what the Spirit is doing, we strengthen and help each other grow. The Honduras Mission Team is answering the call to go into the world and proclaim the saving power of God. The Holy Spirit has moved in their lives and equipped them for the service they will give to the people of Honduras.

In the midst of adversity and pain, many of you have set aside times in your groups to share what is going on and some of the powerful things God is doing, almost in spite of us sometimes. When is the last time your Sunday school class or your Bible study group shared what the Spirit has been doing in your lives?

Make it a habit to tell people that you are living on borrowed power. Then when they ask, tell them where the power comes from. Notice in verse 11 what the disciples were telling people on the day of Pentecost: They weren't discussing their own credentials. They were proclaiming God's mighty acts.

### **Our Present Hope**

The writer Lyle E. Schaller was asked some time ago, "Isn't the hope of the United Methodist Church the young adults?" He replied, "No, that's heresy. The hope of the United Methodist Church is the Holy Spirit."

Now you really did not want to hear that. Our Youth and Young Adult programs are really taking off, and we are about to do new and exciting things in other areas, too. We just returned from a great Senior Adult trip to St. Simon's Island. I noticed while there that the majestic lighthouse at St. Simon's was built the same year this Church began – 1872. While its beacon is still in place, we know there are sophisticated aids to navigation today that render that old lighthouse somewhat meaningless. That can never be true of the church – and you and I are the Church. There is nothing better than the Holy Spirit. There is no substitute that can chart our paths and teach us God's true purpose.

Remember Peter? He was the first to openly confess that Jesus was the Messiah! Yet when they took Jesus, he denied him three times. Peter, the man who said, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God," swore with an oath that he didn't even know Jesus in order to save his skin. But look at him after the Holy Spirit came. Peter is standing on the Portico of Solomon with the others who are speaking in different languages. And what is he doing? He is proclaiming Jesus out in the open for all to see. Unqualified, seemingly out of place, yet the power of the Holy Spirit compensated for all of Peter's shortcomings. That sounds like a plan that we should try!

The Holy Spirit can give you the courage and the boldness to go forth and live your life to the fullest. The Holy Spirit can give you the gifts you need to be successful in life. The Holy Spirit can give you peace and patience in the midst of life's trials. The Holy Spirit can go with you and before you and remind you of the lessons you have learned.

### **By Invitation Only**

Did you notice I said the Holy Spirit "can" do all those things. God is not going to do all those things for you against your will. You have to let the Holy Spirit move in you. You have to open your hearts to the Spirit's presence.

God gave us the Holy Spirit. But we have to look to the Spirit for guidance and help. About 20 years ago the United Methodist Church had an advertising slogan: "Catch the Spirit." How can you catch the Spirit? You can get caught up in the Spirit, but if you were to capture it would it be like the boy with the jar – you know, the one in the commercial who captures the wind in a jar and takes it back to his grandfather's birthday party and uses it to blow out the candles. Wind does not work like that and neither does the Holy Spirit. We cannot control the Spirit. We are simply a vessel – the Temple of the Holy Spirit – a place where the Spirit lives and works through us. I like the current slogan a bit better: "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors." Being open is not just about some secular idea of inclusiveness. "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors" is a spiritual principle. We have to open the church up to allow the Holy Spirit to blow through it. Then miraculous things happen, and people's lives are changed!

Wind cannot blow, and fire cannot burn in a closed room or a closed heart. Allow the Spirit of love and grace to circulate in your soul. Is your life getting a little stuffy? Is your spirit stale and dry? Then open your heart. Let the wind of Holy Spirit blow afresh in your life. Let it bring the cool air of God's love and grace and forgiveness into your heart. Let it kindle in your heart a burning desire to be all that God is calling you to be.

Prayer

---

#### End Notes:

**Pentecost** [Gr.,=fiftieth], important Jewish and Christian feast. The Jewish feast of Pentecost, in Hebrew *Shavuot*, the Feast of Weeks, one of the three pilgrimage festivals, arose as the celebration of the closing of the spring grain harvest, which began formally in Passover 50 days prior; there are numerous references to it in the Bible. From Rabbinic times, the festival commemorates the giving of the law to Moses at Mt. Sinai.

On the Pentecost after the resurrection of Jesus (50 days from the Passover in which He was crucified), the Holy Spirit, according to the Acts of the Apostles, descended on the disciples in the form of tongues of fire accompanied by the sound of a rush of wind, and gave them the power of speaking in such a way that people of different languages could understand them. The Christian feast of Pentecost is an annual commemoration of this event, and it is solemnly observed as the birthday of the church and the feast of the Holy Spirit.

In ecclesiastical calendars Pentecost is the seventh Sunday after Easter and closes Eastertide. In the Western Church there are sometimes special observances, e.g., a penitential vigil, and in ancient times neophytes were baptized at this time. From the white garments of these converts comes Whitsunday, an English name for Pentecost. The great liturgical Latin hymns *Veni Creator Spiritus* and *Veni Sancte Spiritus* were composed for Pentecost. Until Advent the weeks are counted as Sundays after Pentecost.

"Pentecost." The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition. 2008. *Encyclopedia.com* . 27 May. 2009.