

The Zeal of the Holy Spirit makes us the Church
A Sermon preached by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey
St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA, May 15, 2016
The Feast of Pentecost (year C), Acts 2:1-21

Acts 2:1-21 (NRSV): *When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs-- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."*

All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

*'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'*

Today is Pentecost—one of the three great feasts of the church. Today we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, given to Jesus' disciples to make us the church, with power and with zeal.

Today we hear the reading from the Acts of the Apostles. After Jesus was raised from the dead, and after he ascended to the Father, the disciples huddled together in Jerusalem. They were, perhaps, still timid, perhaps still fearful. Then, when they were praying together, the Holy Spirit came upon them. The sound of a rush of wind was heard and they saw tongues of fire resting upon each of them, and they began to speak in other languages about the powerful things that God had done in their lives.

Pentecost was a Jewish feast celebrating the giving of the law, and there were many Jews in Jerusalem from around the Roman Empire. The common language of the Empire was Greek. Latin was the language of law, but Greek was the language of commerce. However, each nation that Rome has conquered still retained its own native language. So here were the disciples, simple Galileans, most of them, praising God in languages that they had not learned—in the native languages of these visitors from around the Empire.

So the disciples received the Holy Spirit—the promised Advocate and Comforter from God the Father, sent through the Son. When they received the Holy Spirit, did they respond by saying “How quaint! We should meet occasionally and have a reenactment of this event! We can dress in period costume and afterwards serve coffee and light refreshments.” Did they see this event as an occasion to build a memorial, or start a social club? No, they began to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ, with power and with zeal! The gift of the Holy Spirit made them the church.

They were friends, and they were more than friends. They became the church—the Christian Community, empowered by God the Holy Spirit. God empowered them for joy and thanksgiving. God empowered them to reach out to the world with God’s grace. The Holy Spirit empowered them to be the church—to be a Christian Community fully committed to God and to Christ’s mission in the world. Their zeal in the Holy Spirit made them the church.

In fact, say that word out loud: “zeal!” You can’t really say “zeal” without some energy—without some drive and passion! That’s an important element in the Christian life. We recognize that God’s power and love in our lives is worth caring about. Zeal for the Good News of God’s grace is central to the Christian life. The Christian life—our relationship with God and our relationships with each other in Christ—is not a sideline hobby. These relationships are at the core of who we are individually and as the church.

There is a company called Percept that runs demographic surveys for religious institutions. They found in some areas that the key element that people say they are looking for in a church is “recreation.” As if a little bit of “church” fits in between basketball and an afternoon at the pool. But God’s vision for the church is more powerful than recreation.

God gives us himself—his nearer presence and power—in the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not (as some might claim) a divine spark found in everyone. The Holy Spirit is uniquely given through Jesus Christ to his disciples. The Holy Spirit was and is already at work in the world around us, but the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost brought God’s presence to the disciples in a new way. The Holy Spirit is not a metaphor for whatever ideas the whole group likes. When the church listens for the voice of the Holy Spirit, we test what we think we hear to be sure that it lines up with Holy Scripture, because the same Holy Spirit inspired the writing of scripture as well.

The promise of the very presence of God is no casual or recreational experience. The Holy Spirit is a life changing gift of God himself. So the zeal of the Holy Spirit drives us to be fully and passionately committed to God in all aspects of our lives—Monday through Saturday as well as Sunday.

In this scene at Pentecost, Peter begins to preach to the people about Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter’s speech goes on beyond today’s reading, and when Peter is done, people ask him “what should we do?” and Peter replies “repent and be baptized, every one of you!” And so they repent and are baptized, and the Christian Community thrives and grows, supporting each other and, as the scripture reads, they “devote themselves to the Apostle’s fellowship and teaching, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” The Holy Spirit empowers them to be the church.

They celebrated the sacraments together. They read scripture together. They learned to know one another. They prayed together. And they did ministry together—healing the sick, sharing the news about Jesus, feeding the hungry, and welcoming people to the joy of knowing the power of the Holy Spirit present in their lives.

This is a vision of the church not just for the first century—but for the church today. So that leaves us with this question: are we that kind of church? Are you that kind of Christian? Are we a Christian Community empowered by the Holy Spirit, engaging in our relationships and ministries with zeal for God?

To some extent, we are, and to some extent, we are becoming that Christian community, empowered by the Holy Spirit. We gather to celebrate the sacraments, we read scripture together in Bible studies and classes, we grow in relationship with each other at picnics and small groups and in the ministries of the church. We serve Christ in the world and welcome others to share the joy we've found.

Today, we baptize Andrew Chacos and Hudson Karry. We welcome these new brothers in Christ into this Christian Community. Here is this place, they will have the opportunity for life giving relationships, the opportunity to learn and grow, to give and share, to discover God's grace, to feel sweet forgiveness, to learn right from wrong, to gain true wisdom and to serve as Christ served others. This is a wonderful and sacred calling—one that we renew each week as we recite the creed. In this calling God blesses us. Through this calling, God blesses the world.

I invite you to turn to p.304 in the Book of Common Prayer. There we read the questions and answers of the Baptismal Covenant. The first three questions are answered by the clauses of the Apostles' Creed. This is important because *who* we worship is important. This way, we do not worship ourselves or our things or other gods that compete for our attention. Baptism is not a magic bath, but a commitment to a particular God in response to what God has done in our lives.

Then there are five questions that describe the Christian life. The first recalls those words from Acts that I just quoted to you: "Will you continue in the Apostles' fellowship and teaching, the breaking of bread and in the prayers?" For our commitment to God is a commitment to stay in relationship with the Christian Community of the Church. The second asks "Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?" We take sin seriously, but we also take the grace of God even more seriously. The third question asks "Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?" Our example in life is a reflection of how we are formed and shaped, and God is well served by our willingness to name the One who has formed and shaped us.

The fourth question asks: "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" Ask God has loved us through the sacrifice of Jesus, so we are also called to love those around us—sacrificially. The last question asks "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" We are called to love all of God's creatures because God loves all of us. We are likewise called to love even the ones who, like us, don't deserve love.

When you make or renew these vows, you take on the responsibilities of being the church. Each baptized person takes on the commitment to give his or her entire life to God—living in relationship with the Christian Community, not as a matter of recreation, but fully committed to God with the zeal and power of the Holy Spirit. As you make and renew these vows, commit yourself to God with the zeal of the Holy Spirit.

Just like the first disciples, we can't do this on our own. When we are faithful, the Holy Spirit empowers us and works in us and through us. God brings grace and blessing to people in and through this community. That's not a hobby—that's not recreation—that's zeal for the Holy Spirit—that's the church alive with the power of God!

My brothers and sisters in Christ, and guests who are here curious about what St. Peter & St. Paul is all about, I invite you to a life invigorated by the Holy Spirit, alive with the power of God. Open yourselves to God's love and power, and re-dedicate yourselves with zeal to a new life in Christ. For the zeal of the Holy Spirit makes us the church.