

Cindy Voth  
Waterford Mennonite Church  
June 8, 2014 – Pentecost  
Acts 2

Purpose: To inspire the congregation to increase their receptivity to the role, presence, and power of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

So, how have you been able to enter into this worship service without the traditional props to help you? I wonder for example if our blood pressure is higher or lower than normal due to not having a printed order of worship to hold in our hands? Or what about the anxiety that is present or not present in not being in control and knowing what might be coming next? Well hopefully we have been able to give us all a small taste of what it might have felt like for the crowd gathered that day of Pentecost. They were gathered, out of faithfulness to Jesus' invitation to wait until the arrival of the gift of God, the gift of the Holy Spirit. They had no idea what this really meant and so they gathered with anticipation, with hope, with expectancy; all the while not being able to really picture how such a gift might arrive.

On the other hand, *we* come to worship each Sunday morning and more or less I bet most of us, even the young in our midst, could come up with a sample order of worship based on what is normally done. Now, I don't say that to critique us, because I do believe that we are able to hold a large degree of variance in our worship services in terms of order and what is all included. However, we can easily admit that there is predictability to our worship services. I assume that it is rare for us to go home from worship and say to ourselves "wow, I had no idea something like that was going to happen in worship today!" I think I would go so far to even say that there is predictability in our lives as followers of Jesus. Is this predictability all bad? What do you think? How do you think the early church in Acts would respond to those questions?

This morning as we have joined for worship we have done so as an avenue to celebrate and remember the arrival of the promised gift of God, the gift of the Holy Spirit. We have joined

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our hearts in singing songs of praises to God for this remarkable gift, we have joined our voices in declaring time and time again “none can stop the Spirit burning now inside us!” We have heard from our children as they lift their hearts in prayer, we have shared significant bible passages which the Spirit has used to transform us, and we have invited time and time again the Spirit’s presence in our midst this morning. Now we turn to looking at the Biblical narrative that has informed our understanding of Pentecost, of this gift of God, the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

I think it is significant to be reminded that the book of Acts begins with the faith community gathered expectantly waiting for something to happen. In verse eight of chapter one we read the familiar charge from Jesus: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” This verse has been “rightly seen as the key text of the book”<sup>i</sup> of Acts. Here “Jesus speaks of the power that the apostles will receive when the Holy Spirit has come upon them.”<sup>ii</sup>

So here in chapter one we see that this faith community, rather than taking matters into their own hands and working at getting organized and then charging out on their own, has withdrawn to wait and to pray. The next move and the next step in instruction and guidance is God’s. And so the community is obedient and they wait... and they pray.

The book of Acts tells the story of the early church and is written as a form of proclamation to strengthen believers. Therefore we can understand that the book of Acts was written for “Christians who were struggling to retain the boldness, faith and confidence in the face of the new internal and external struggles.”<sup>iii</sup> With this as the purpose of Acts it should inform how we engage the text, and how we receive the challenges posed in the text for us as

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believers. The book of Acts, particularly the first two chapters, contains a message meant to challenge us to be obedient to the calling of Jesus and to be bold in our proclamations of what we believe and know to be true through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Back to our text for this morning, in Acts chapter two, we find the believers still gathered, and still waiting for the promise that Jesus made that God would send a gift to them. Luke offers that it was the day of Pentecost. Chalmer Faw, author of the Believers Church Commentary, reminds us that this was “The Jewish Day of Pentecost, one of the three major festivals of Judaism at which every adult male Jew was commanded by the Law to appear in Jerusalem. The other two are Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles. Pentecost was originally known as the Day of the First Fruits of the Wheat Harvest, or just First Fruits (Exodus 34:22). Before long it came also to be called the Feast of Weeks because it was celebrated seven weeks or a week of weeks from the day after the Sabbath of Passover. From the second century B.C. on, it was known as Pentecost, from the Greek word meaning “fifty.”<sup>iv</sup> In addition it would have been estimated that there would have been around 180,000 people in attendance and out of that 180,000, 120,000 of them would have been from foreign lands.<sup>v</sup> I think it is easy for us to forget the context in why Jerusalem was flooded during this time with others making their pilgrimage to the temple to join in the celebration.

We should not allow the irony to be lost on us that in fact the new Pentecost experience will continue in the theme of harvest as we read in verse forty-one that about three thousand were baptized and added to their number that day. That my friends is a huge ingathering! The coming of the Spirit also marks the “first fruits of the new era.”<sup>vi</sup>

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Well Luke continues on to share with us the familiar, powerful, yet surreal story of Pentecost. First there is the rushing wind. The presence of the wind is intriguing as the Greek word for Spirit, *pneuma*, and the Hebrew word for Spirit, *ruakh*, both also mean wind. Then there are the tongues of fire, being filled with the Holy Spirit and the miracle of being able to understand each other in their own language.

Luke also tells us that there are God-fearing Jews from every nation in Jerusalem. And when they heard the sound they came rushing to see what was going on and the text says that they were utterly amazed. And then several verses later we are told that they are amazed and perplexed and they asked one another “What does this mean?” I have to admit that this is one of my favorite parts of this passage! The “Greek verb (used) here is a strong one, meaning “blew their minds.”<sup>vii</sup> They cannot even begin to comprehend what is going on and so they ask each other, what does this mean?! They experienced this as something so out of the ordinary, so beyond the normal framework, so not business as usual, so unpredictable that they were forced to dream up a plausible explanation for what in the world was going on!

So, what do they come up with to describe or articulate the power the church proclaims as a gift of God, that in-breaking of the Spirit? Their response – blame it on them having too much wine! They look at the situation, not understanding, and not being able to comprehend the magnitude of what just happened, and are so unsettled and so threatened by what has happened that they say they must just be drunk! As one author noted, they must devise some explanation, or some rationalization for such irrationality.<sup>viii</sup>

So, we must ask ourselves then a question I think it is safe to assume we do not ask ourselves every day! What is the correlation between how this faith community was acting and

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that of the actions of one that is under the influence of alcohol? I doubt that anyone has ever been a guest here at Waterford, only to leave after the service and declare “I am never going back there, they act they like are drunk!” Yielding to the presence and power of the Holy Spirit must mean then that our lives are transformed from the inside out. We cannot continue as ‘business as usual’. Instead our outwards actions reflect the transformation brought about through the receiving and welcoming the gift of God, the in-breaking of the Holy Spirit. Like with alcohol, or drugs, we yield ourselves to a control outside of ourselves that alters our actions, our speech, our thought processes, our entire lives. However, and this is the crucial point, unlike drugs and alcohol the Holy Spirit and its power of transforming who we are is about life, fullness, joy, and bringing out our God-given gifts.

This week as I sat with this text I repeatedly thought of the new song by Casting Crowns called “Thrive” as I believe that it encapsulates what it means to allow ourselves to yield to and fully welcome the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Some of the lyrics to this song are:

Here in this worn and weary land  
Where many a dream has died  
Like a tree planted by the water  
We never will run dry  
So living water flowing through,  
God we thirst for more of You.  
Fill our hearts and flood our souls  
With one desire.  
Just to know You and make You known  
We lift Your name on High  
Shine like the sun made darkness run and  
hide

We know we were made for so much more  
Than ordinary lives  
It's time for us to more than just survive  
We were made to thrive.  
Joy unspeakable, faith unsinkable,  
Love unstoppable, anything is possible  
We know we were made for so much more  
Than ordinary lives  
It's time for us to more than just survive  
We were made to thrive<sup>ix</sup>

I believe that the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost is a way that God is working to help us to thrive, to have life, and to have it abundantly. Do not hear me saying that I believe in what is

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known as the “prosperity gospel” that being that God’s main desire is for us to be happy and prosperous. I see Casting Crowns saying we are made to thrive to reinforce Jesus’ words in John chapter ten when he says “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” I also see Pentecost as a way that God is propelling us beyond ourselves to share the message like that from the prophet Joel, that this gift, this abundant life, this thriving is for **all**. No matter your gender, your age, your nationality, your social class: God’s Spirit is poured out on all, both now and for the coming generations. This my friends is the message of the Book of Acts, the message we are employed and empowered to share with all that we know!

However, doing so might lead others to wonder what is exactly wrong with us? What makes us a little off from the ‘normal’ people? They might wonder if we are under the influence of something else when we start preaching justice, and love and joy to all, no matter one’s race, social class standing, education level, language spoken, immigration status, or choices they have made in their lives. I wonder, how would our lives as followers of Jesus be transformed, how would our life together here at Waterford be transformed if we each decided to grow in our openness to the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives? Would we like the faith community in Acts chapter 2 attract people peering in our windows during a morning worship service, trying to just catch a glimpse of the craziness that is going on in here as we are filled with the Holy Spirit!

Would we become more like Peter, the one who followed at a distance, the one who denied knowing Jesus three times, the one we left “weeping in the courtyard, a disciple tested and found wanting”<sup>x</sup> (Interpretation 31), who now is the one who stands up and addressed the

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crowd? How would being filled with the Spirit increase our boldness and our need to proclaim the pivotal truth with Peter that “Jesus the Nazarene, a man thoroughly accredited by God to you—this Jesus, following the deliberate and well-thought-out plan of God, was betrayed by men who took the law into their own hands, and was handed over to you. And you pinned him to a cross and killed him. But God untied the death ropes and raised him up. Death was no match for him... Change your life. Turn to God and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins are forgiven. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is targeted to you and your children, but also to all who are far away—whomever, in fact, our Master God invites.”<sup>xi</sup>

This morning on Pentecost it is my prayer that with the help of the Holy Spirit may we grow in our boldness of proclaiming this message of the gift of God, the promise of salvation, the reality of hope, joy, and forgiveness or all. I also pray that we might be able to welcome a higher degree of unpredictability in our lives and in our life together. With the Spirit’s help, may it be so. Amen.

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In just a moment I will invite us all, of all ages, to consider receiving being anointed with oil as a symbol of our openness and receptiveness to the Holy Spirit in our lives. Throughout the Old and New Testaments we read various accounts of individuals who were anointed with oil in a variety of contexts. We read of individuals anointed with oil as they were consecrated as a leader, or as a sign that they were set apart for a specific ministry, anointed as an act of cleansing, or act of healing, or act of empowerment, or as a symbol of being open to the Holy Spirit.

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We will first have several moments of silence where we are invited to look inwards. I challenge us to consider the ways we quench or silence the Spirit in our lives. And then as we sit and listen may we be challenged to hear how the Spirit is inviting, challenging, and beckoning us to magnify its voice and power in our lives.

After these moments of silence the pastoral team will be available for those who wish to be anointed as a physical symbol of our openness to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Those who wish to be anointed may choose to be anointed on their forehead or hand. As we anoint you we will make the sign of the cross and say: **“We anoint you with oil as a sign of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in your life.”**

If you wish to be anointed, but would rather be anointed in your seat, please signal for one of our ushers and Pastor Neil and will come to your seat to anoint you.

During this time may God pour out God’s blessings on us, the Holy Spirit empower and convict us, and through it all Jesus’ name be glorified. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Chalmer E. Faw, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Acts* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press), 30.

<sup>ii</sup> Faw, *Acts*, 30.

<sup>iii</sup> William H. Willimon, *Interpretation: Acts* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press), 35.

<sup>iv</sup> Faw, *Acts*, 41.

<sup>v</sup> Faw, *Acts*, 41.

<sup>vi</sup> Faw, *Acts*, 41.

<sup>vii</sup> Faw, *Acts*, 43.

<sup>viii</sup> Willimon, 30.

<sup>ix</sup> *Casting Crowns, Thrive*.

<sup>x</sup> Willimon, 31.

<sup>xi</sup> *Acts 2:22b-24, 38-39 The Message*