

Acts 2:1-21

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.'*

Embracing the Holy Spirit - May 23, 2021

Acts 2:1-21

When do you feel alive? Well, of course we all feel alive, I mean we're watching this worship service, aren't we? We're seeing, hearing, breathing: we are alive. That's not what I mean. When do you feel alive, exhilarated, excited? When do you feel so filled with joy and confidence that you have a time of complete fulfillment? When do you feel like anything, absolutely anything, is possible?

Perhaps it is being outdoors in nature. Standing atop a mountain, strolling along the beach and gazing the ocean. Being out in the middle of nowhere at night, seeing all the stars in their incredible glory, or experiencing the roar of a gushing waterfall, seeing the power of nature up close and personal.

Others may feel alive in the warmth and intimacy of relationships. Being with your life partner. Cuddling a newborn baby. Sitting around a campfire with your best friends.

Some may experience life in the power of their own creativity. Musicians talk of experiencing a feeling of transcendency when they feel they become part of the music they are playing and feel literally transported to another level of existence. Artists report staring at a blank canvas and then in the blink of an eye, looking at a finished work and having no idea how the paint got there. People from writers to bakers to woodworkers to potters have moments where their work virtually creates itself without thought, without correction. It is said that Mozart could sit in front of blank staff paper and create a flawless symphony without making a single correction without playing a single note.

In all these moments of being alive, it is as if something takes over, enabling us to accomplish far more than we had ever imagined. Such moments are rare, but I hope that you understand a bit of what I am talking about and have experienced such moments in your own life. You can't make them happen, they just do.

And if you get what I'm saying, you know that when the glow fades, when you come back to earth, when the proverbial Cinderella's ball is over, you know that you have been in touch with something way beyond yourself, way beyond your normal experience of life and living.

And you long to experience that state of being again.

What I have just described, friends, is my poor attempt at describing the spiritual union God grants us in something called the Holy Spirit. For Christians, the Holy Spirit is an indispensable part of what it means to follow Jesus Christ. Sadly, however, it is also the most ignored and most misunderstood part of being a Christian.

Today of course, is Pentecost Sunday. It is the “birthday of the church” the day some 2000 years ago when scripture tells us the disciples of Jesus were touched in an amazing and incredible way. All of the sudden, these people, numbering fewer than one hundred, experienced the presence of God in their lives. They experienced God directly and powerfully just as we perhaps have felt God enfold us in nature, in art, in relationships transporting us to a new level of being.

On that day, something indescribable happened. Something beyond human understanding and explanation. On that day of Pentecost something totally inexplicable happened. Consider just a few days before Jesus departed this earth for the last time. For forty days, Jesus had been appearing to his followers, first in small groups then in larger numbers. He proved to them that their teacher, their friend, their Lord and savior, was really and truly alive. Jesus who was dead, was very much alive and walking among them. Was it explainable? No. Was it understandable? No. Was it real? Yes, very much yes. In some amazing way, Jesus was alive, defying human understanding back then and even now. Yet as much as humans today might want to deny or ignore the resurrection of Jesus, the fact remains that a group of several hundred people living 2000 years ago were utterly convinced of the reality of Jesus being raised from the dead. They were so convinced that ten of the eleven original disciples of Jesus went to their own deaths proclaiming to the world that they saw the dead Jesus and the crucified Christ on this earth alive. I mean why would any one of us, let alone ten disciples, let alone the thousands and thousands who have come afterwards, go to their deaths utterly and completely convinced that the risen Christ is a reality.

But on that Pentecost Sunday, just the opposite was true. The disciples were beyond depressed, they were despondent. They had no clue about their lives or their future. Imagine, they all saw Jesus die. Not in person of course because they had all run away from the hill on which he was crucified. They all experienced the pain of loss and the shame of guilt in knowing that in his hour of need they had all abandoned him. Peter feeling the most guilty because he, exactly as Jesus predicted, denied even knowing Jesus to everyone who confronted him.

But then, then, then, the miracle of Easter! The resurrection! Jesus defeated death and arose to be with his followers once again. How was this possible? Only God could make it happen and so God did. Can you imagine the joy the disciples felt? Can you imagine how exhilarated they must have been? Those extra, unexpected, incredible days with their risen Lord must have been indescribable.

But it had to end. Jesus was just one man. There was no way that he alone could be everywhere, everyplace that he was needed. His message of love, truth, and justice was not his property. It belonged, rather to all humanity, Jesus wanted everyone to hear and embrace the good news for themselves. But he could not share the good news alone.

His followers, only his followers, could accomplish that. Jesus needed not a dozen, but hundreds, thousands, millions to spread the good news.

But how, how, how was this going to happen? Jesus gathered with his followers one last time. According to Matthew, Jesus gave them his final charge: go into the world and make disciples of all nations. Then, then, then he was gone. Ascended to be with God. Gone from the earth with only his disciples remaining.

And then what? Now for sure, the disciples knew Jesus was gone. He defeated death. He lived and taught among them. Then, that's it. Leaving by his own decision and on his own terms.

Now what? Frankly, the disciples didn't have a clue. Sure the gospels report that Jesus promised his disciples something called the Holy Spirit, but what was that? The point was that the disciples had always taken their instructions from Jesus. He spoke, they listened and tried in their own imperfect way to follow him. Now, no more Jesus.

Friends, on that Pentecost day, celebrated in modern Jewish tradition as being 50 days after the Passover and the day that Moses received the Ten Commandments from God, the disciples were all alone and clueless. They couldn't possibly know what to expect. Once again, they were depressed. Once again they had no idea what to expect.

But then, at the moment where the disciples could not feel any worse or any more abandoned. Life! Restoration! Exhilaration! A Miracle. The Holy Spirit crashed into the their lives — into their minds — into their hearts. In one moment, the disciples were transformed and made alive.

All at once, these women and men gushed out of the upper room in which they were hiding in fear and poured out into the crowds gathered for the Pentecost celebration. And these followers were so inspired so converted, so transported beyond their daily reality that they had the power to speak in other languages, languages they perhaps had never heard before.

But the amazing thing is that all these disciples, perhaps one hundred or less, had the confidence and the ability to fan out into the crowd and speak with authority about Jesus Christ and the love He has for the world and the utterly new and unimaginable way God has created to be with humanity. Suddenly, they were alive!

This is why I asked you if you had ever been alive, really alive! Because no doubt those disciples were alive and experiencing life and God and Jesus in ways they had never felt before. They could literally move mountains: transforming thousands of people to become believers and followers of Jesus.

Friends, it is impossible to explain Pentecost in human terms. There is no science, there is no systematic analysis, there is not rationality in what happened that day. If you're looking for a systematic presentation and objective demonstration, you're not going to find one.

But no one can argue with the results. On that day, thousands believed the good news for themselves and accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. On that day, people's lives were changed forever. On that day, the church was born!

When Jesus ascended into heaven, Matthew's gospel reports that some of the disciples doubted. Despite all they had seen, all they had experienced, some still doubted that Jesus was for real. However, on that Pentecost Day, no one could doubt that the church was born for real. Look, what other explanation can possibly exist for the church? Please show us how a group of depressed, defeated men and women, people who personally saw their leader die, suddenly become this amazing powerful force converting thousands to a new way of life and living? The only explanation is God. The only explanation is God's Holy Spirit entering into the lives of those disciples and empowering them to spread the good news regardless of personal cost.

Friends, this is the Holy Spirit in action. This is how our Christian faith is activated. I fear, friends, I fear that too many of us fear the Holy Spirit working in our lives. Rather than embracing it, as the early church did, we run away from it. We reject it. We positively don't want it!

Pentecost shows us that the Spirit is real. The Spirit is powerful. The Spirit changes us. The Spirit changes the world. The Spirit, in short, makes us feel alive!

What is life? What is living for? Are we on this earth to make money? Are we here to accumulate things? Are we here to simply make babies to carry on the next generation?

No, no, a thousand times NO! If you follow Jesus Christ. If you believe He is your Lord and Savior. If you believe in your heart of hearts that Jesus Christ is the best and most important thing to ever happen to the world. Then our path forward is totally and abundantly clear. Friends, I urge you, I beg you, to embrace the Holy Spirit. Welcome the power of God into your life. Do not fear. Do not be afraid. Allow God's Spirit to invade, permeate, literally take over your life.

Allow, friends, allow God to use you, you, yes you. With all your talents and all your faults and all your fears, to transform the world. Because you can! Look, just look at the people whom Jesus called to follow him. They were not rich. They were not experts. They were not trained public speakers. They were just regular folks, as regular as you and me.

But by the Holy Spirit, Jesus transformed them. Transformed them as He will transform you. Embrace, embrace the Holy Spirit and change, change, change the world!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.