

SERMON TITLE: "The Practices of the Spirit" (Pentecost series #5)
SERMON TEXT: Acts 2:1-4, 14a, 36-47
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: June 28, 2020, at First UMC (John Wesley's birthday & FUMC's 150th anniversary)

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the Day of Pentecost on May 31, we've been using our church's "Birthday Box" to help us think about what that coming of the Holy Spirit was like. Let's review what we've found inside our Birthday Box so far. You'll recall that we had birthday candles and matches to represent the fire of Pentecost. We had some streamers and a pinwheel to symbolize the winds of change. We had this little rainbow ribbon to demonstrate the power of diversity. And last week, I talked about this Father's Day card to help us understand how the Holy Spirit comes to us as the promise of the Father.

Today we find one more item: a John Wesley bobble-head doll. Why John Wesley? Well, one good reason is that today is John Wesley's birthday. Yes, in England, in 1703--317 years ago today--the founder, or father, of the Methodist Church was born. And, coincidentally, today is the exact 150th anniversary of our very own First United Methodist Church's beginning here in Ogden. On June 28, 1870, the first Methodist preacher, Rev. G. M. Pierce, arrived in Ogden by train. The transcontinental railroad had just been completed one year before, and Rev. Pierce preached the first Ogden Methodist worship service right there in the Union Station. From that start, our congregation began meeting in various downtown locations, built the church at 26th and Jefferson, and finally relocated to Marriott-Slaterville in 2008. Had the coronavirus not held us down, we would be having a big party in honor of our 150th anniversary. So, today, we celebrate the birthday of our Ogden First United Methodist Church as well as the birthday of the entire church around the world.

Of course, the church would never have been born if it weren't for how the Holy Spirit came with the fire of Pentecost, the winds of change, the power of diversity, and the promise of the Father. Today, though, I want us to realize that for the church to be born successfully, one additional

characteristic had to be present. Let's dig into our verses from Acts 2 and see how the birth of the church also required the practices of the Spirit.

PRACTICES OF THE SPIRIT

After Peter preached his stirring sermon indicting the Israelites for their unjust execution of Jesus, the people wanted to know what they should do. Peter told them to repent of their violent sin and be baptized. Verse 41 tells us that about 3000 people did just that. Their sorrow for killing Jesus was real, and they wanted to be cleansed of that guilt and start their lives anew.

Repentance and baptism were a great place to start, and the Holy Spirit was definitely there, stirring those changes of mind and heart. But then the Spirit needed to take the new converts farther along. It wouldn't do for them to desire change, but not be able to fulfill it. It wouldn't be real if they renounced what they had done wrong, but never took steps to do what was right. To use the kind of words John Wesley might have used, the new believers needed to go on to perfection. There is more to Christian life than just forgiveness and justification. There is also the need for sanctification, that process of becoming more and more holy, more and more like Jesus. When we allow the Holy Spirit to actually get into our business and change the way we operate, that's when Pentecost really comes.

To get there, the 3000 newly-baptized Christian believers devoted themselves to some practices of the Spirit. In Acts 2:42, we see that they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and the prayers. These spiritual disciplines are what would turn babes in Christ into mature Christians. These practices of the Spirit were the ways that a new believer would be reshaped, remolded, and transformed over time. These spiritual disciplines were the steps and processes by which persons would be taken out of their old ways of life and engaged in new understandings of reality, new ways of being God's people in the world.

Let's think about what those same spiritual disciplines might look like for us today. To devote ourselves to **the apostles' teaching** would likely begin with regular attendance at worship, where we

learn from sermons and hymns based on the Bible and Christian tradition. Those of us who are serious about Christian faith development might also consider engaging in Sunday school and other kinds of classes where we can work out our faith in age-appropriate and robust discussions with others who are doing likewise. If you are someone who has found our worship services online, but you don't yet belong to a small study group, I certainly encourage you to go deeper. Check out our church's website, www.fumcogdenut.org, to find the adult classes and groups we have available.

Christian fellowship and social connections are also important to help us make wise choices about how we will behave and think. When we get together with other Christians, we're able to encourage and support one another in positive and faithful habits. We're able to provide friendship and practical assistance. We're able to enjoy wholesome fun and celebrations that promote our spiritual well-being. We're able to do mission projects together that give our lives purpose and meaning. The ease of Christian fellowship is something we've all been missing a lot during this coronavirus shut down. Now we have to be a lot more intentional in order to spend time with other Christian people. We have to reach out by telephone or cards, by email or Skype. We have to schedule Facetime or Zoom meetings. But that's OK. We can adapt and do those things too.

Devoting ourselves to **the breaking of bread** can be understood in two different ways. One is Holy Communion. Certainly, it's good for Christians to partake of this sacrament which draws us together now and across the millennia of Christian faith. In fact, I hope you will make plans to have your communion elements ready for that sacrament during worship next Sunday, July 5.

"Breaking of bread" can also mean sharing meals together, which is another means of Christian fellowship. For several months now, it's been impossible for us to share any meals or refreshments at the church. But during our Wednesday Lunch by Zoom, some of us have been able to enjoy a coronavirus-free meal-time together, and you are welcome to join in that relaxed time of eating and conversation.

Prayer, of course, is the Holy Spirit's strong way of connecting us to God and one to another in as we express our joys and concerns. Prayer is like a divine feeding tube that infuses nutrients directly into our bodies and souls to give us life-sustaining hope. Besides our own prayers, we can read the church's weekly email to see more prayer requests from the congregation. We can also pray together in worship and classes. And, in our Zoom fellowship hour at 11:00, we always tell more about those prayer requests and situations, so we will know better how to pray.

There's one more way in Acts 2 that the Christian believers devoted themselves to their new faith. In verses 43-47, we read about their communal practices of **sharing their possessions** and distributing resources to all, as any had need. One of the reasons why the Lord was able to "add to their number those who were being saved" was because these people had glad and generous hearts. Their goodwill was not just for themselves, but for everyone. They understood that our salvation is not just a *personal* relationship with Jesus, but it's also the well-being and abundant life of a community and society at large.

These verses remind me of the New Testament book of James, where we read, "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (2:15-17). Likewise, in Matthew 25, Jesus told a parable about the importance of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and caring for the sick and imprisoned.

Caring about other people one-on-one and caring about people as a whole community has been a part of Christianity's DNA since the earliest times. Just as the Holy Spirit comes to us, among us, and through us when we devote ourselves to worship, study, fellowship, communion, and prayers, so does the Holy Spirit come in this important practice. Caring for the physical and material needs of others is one of the essential practices of the Spirit.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion to this sermon and to this entire Pentecost series, I'm going to share with you something that Sylvia Brooks wrote in a card, after she and her family moved away to Florida. Before Sylvia, Dorothy, and Alana left their house in Layton, some of us did a drive-by going-away party for them. If memory serves me right, it was Monday, May 18. We gathered our cars in the park-n-ride lot at Hwy 89 and Antelope Drive. Then we drove over to the Brooks' house nearby.

This is what Sylvia wrote in her card:

Wow! What a send-off you ALL gave to me and mine! I don't think I will ever forget Dorothy's rushing into my room and screaming, "Hurry, Mom—no shoes—just come with me quickly down the steps and out the front door." And, of course, I couldn't imagine what was going on. I thought truly that the house was on fire. And, then, I saw the parade of cars with so many church members and friends, driving by the house, waving, shouting good-byes, and honking horns! I have NEVER, in my 84 God-blessed and wonderful years, ever had such a marvelous send-off!!! Thank you, and please thank all who participated and organized it!

No, it wasn't a house on fire that rushed Sylvia out to the porch. But it certainly was a congregation of repentant and baptized Christians, who devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers, and to a generous sharing with all, whatever their need.

Come, Holy Spirit, come! There's a lot of excitement in the fire of Pentecost, the winds of change, the power of diversity, and the promise of the Father. But the Holy Spirit's arrival at Pentecost isn't complete until we devote ourselves to these practices of the Spirit.