

SERMON TITLE: "Acts of the Spirit: Gift of the Spirit"  
SERMON TEXT: Acts 2:32-47  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: June 6, 2021, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

Nearly all day Friday, I participated in an online clergy meeting. It was the clergy session that usually happens at our Mountain Sky Annual Conference. Due to COVID, this year's annual conference has been postponed until October, so we can meet in person here in Ogden at the Eccles Convention Center. But some of our clergy business had to be conducted before July 1, so we got it done in a long Zoom meeting on Friday.

Part of that essential business was voting on candidates for ministry. Before all of us ordained ministers made this one last vote of approval for the new candidates, they each appeared online and told us a little bit about their faith journey and call to ministry. Each ministerial candidate told their story differently, of course. One of them quoted a mystic poem from the 1300s that says, "I am the hole in a flute that the Christ's breath moves through." Since I used to play flute back in my younger years, I liked that poetic image. "I am the hole in a flute that the Christ's breath moves through."<sup>1</sup>

I also like that image of Christ's breath blowing through a flute because, ever since May 16, we've been talking about the wind-breath-Spirit of God. On Ascension Sunday, we talked about Jesus' promise to his disciples that, after he was lifted up to heaven, he would send the Holy Spirit upon them, and that this would make possible the succession of Christian ministry and leadership. On Pentecost Sunday, we wore red clothes in commemoration of the flames that hovered over the disciples' heads as the powerful winds of the Holy Spirit blew among them. Then, last Sunday, we talked about the witness of the Holy Spirit that gave evidence and testimony to the truth about Jesus' divinity and resurrection. Today, we progress to the final verses of Acts, chapter two. As we contemplate the rest of Peter's sermon and how the crowd in Jerusalem reacted, let's see how we'll respond to the "Gift of the Spirit."

### **1—GIFT OF THE SPIRIT IS A PROMISE**

Let's start with the fact that the gift of the Spirit is a promise. In Acts, chapter one, the gift of the Spirit was a promise made by Jesus to the disciples that was fulfilled in the early verses of Acts, chapter two. Now, here in Acts 2:39, we see that the Apostle Peter was using that same language of promise. No longer was this promise aimed at just the 12 most special disciples, or even toward the 120 or so Christian believers who had gathered in the upper room and who experienced the wind, fire, and languages. Now, in this latter part of Acts chapter two, we see that Peter was offering the gift of the Holy Spirit to thousands of Jews who had gathered in Jerusalem for the annual Pentecost harvest festival. And, in verse 39, Peter indicated that this gift of the Holy Spirit wasn't even just for them. Instead, he preached, "The promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him."

Wow! That's a big promise. It kind of makes me think of COVID vaccinations. Remember how, for most of a year, all we could do is hope and pray for the promise of effective vaccines to be manufactured? Then there were the first people who got their vaccinations—doctors, nurses, and first responders. Then the vaccinations were promised to the employees and residents of nursing homes and senior living communities. Then the promise spread to teachers, and then to people 70 and older, and then to people 50 and older and people with certain medical conditions, and then to people 16 and older, and now to kids who are as young as 12. Vaccine trials are in the works for little kids too, giving promise to families, elementary schools, and day care centers. That's how it's been in the United States and a few other super-fortunate nations. Now we're hearing that the US is also freeing up vaccinations to be shared with Canada, Mexico, South Korea, Guatemala, and other countries of the world. For sure, it will take a long time to stop all the sickness and death. But the vaccination promise is spreading far and wide.

This analogy of COVID vaccinations helps us imagine the positive promise of the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit was and is even better because it doesn't have to undergo any experiments and clinical trials. It doesn't have to pass muster with the CDC or the FDA. The Holy Spirit isn't limited by shortages of raw materials or distribution delays. There certainly aren't any hang ups due to political corruption, national poverty, or lack of medical infrastructure. With the Holy Spirit, there's no job criteria or age requirement. For everyone everywhere, the gift of the Spirit is a promise.

## **2—GIFT OF THE SPIRIT CONVEYS BENEFITS**

I think all of us have had the experience of putting our trust in something, only later to find out that it was more hype than reality. The gift we thought we'd be receiving never materialized. But the gift of the Spirit was and is no empty promise. This gift of the Spirit conveys a lot of benefits.

The first and most obvious benefit is relief of guilt and forgiveness of sins. In verse 38, Peter explained to the crowd that the gift of the Holy Spirit would come to them as the result of repentance and baptism. That means we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit when we're willing to admit our mistakes and when we're sorry for what we've done wrong. The Holy Spirit comes upon us when we want to change our behaviors and clean up our lives.

In Acts 2, the sin Peter specifically named was the unjust crucifixion of Jesus. If those persons responsible for Jesus' death would be willing to admit the error of their ways, and if they would desire to change their understanding of who Jesus was, then there would be the huge benefit of a clean conscience and a fresh start in a new life of faith. Obviously, we today aren't guilty of yelling to Pilate to crucify God's Son. But, through what we do or what we don't do, we certainly still behave in a variety of unjust ways that hurt other people who are God's children. If we're willing to admit and repent of our sins, then the gift of the Spirit can convey to us the benefit of forgiveness and a cleaned-up heart.

After Peter finished preaching his message and some 3000 people accepted this new faith in Jesus, the gift of the Holy Spirit conferred on them a number of other benefits as well. Acts 2:42 tells us

that they had access to the apostles' teaching, which gave them increased understanding of the Christian faith. They also enjoyed a community of fellowship with other believers, they found meaning in breaking bread together, and their spirits were nurtured in prayer.

Verse 43 indicates that the gift of the Spirit brought awe into their lives. We all need some awe, don't we? Our hope and faith are inspired by the wonder-filled awe of a beautiful sunset, the awe of a mountain vista, the awe of a vast ocean, or the awe of a newborn baby. That same kind of awe can come to us through God's miraculous, forgiving, and compassionate love. When I read here about the signs done by the apostles, I wonder if those were like the powerful encouragement so many of us have received from all those beautifully-written get-well and praying-for-you cards sent by Carolyn Moore on behalf of the church? Or the cards, prayers, phone calls, and casseroles from so many others of you? The gift of the Spirit conveys the benefit of healing encouragement that is wondrous and amazing.

Acts 2:44 tells us another benefit of the gift of the Spirit. Those Jews—who repented of their sins, were baptized, and received the gift of the Holy Spirit—also shared all things in common so that they could help those who were in need.

This makes me think of an article I read in this week's United Methodist News. The article was about the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We've been praying for the Congolese because of the volcano that erupted on May 22 and destroyed United Methodist churches, forced thousands of people from their homes, and polluted their water supplies with volcanic ash. But this week's story wasn't about that. It was about the problem of armed conflict just a little bit north of the volcano. Due to armed rebels that have been in the area for about six months, farmers have been unable to work in their fields, and the population hasn't had enough to eat. So, "the United Methodist Committee on Relief recently provided almost \$100,000 USD to buy a one-month supply of food and other necessities for more than 850 vulnerable households."<sup>2</sup>

There will probably always be more need in our community and the world than any one of us or any large group of us can ever solve, but our Christian faith calls us to share our resources with those in need. I realize that sometimes we don't want to share because we think it will be too painful, but Acts 2:46 indicates that these new believers did these things with "glad and generous hearts." The more time they spent worshipping together at the temple, the more the gift of the Holy Spirit filled them with positive benefits, so that they were "praising God and having the goodwill of all the people." I take that last phrase to mean that—not only did they express goodwill for God and others, but—the others also had goodwill toward them. And, of course, that was an attractive feature that allowed the Lord to add to their number day by day those who wanted to share in these benefits that come through the gift of the Spirit.

### **CONCLUSION**

One of our hymns offers this prayer:

O Spirit of the living God, thou light and fire divine,  
 descend upon thy church once more, and make it truly thine.  
 Fill it with love and joy and power, with righteousness and peace,  
 till Christ shall dwell in human hearts, and sin and sorrow cease.<sup>3</sup>

Today, we'd be hard pressed to replicate the events of Acts 2, when the Spirit came with wind, fire, and languages, and 3000 people converted to Christian faith in one day. Christianity isn't the new thing anymore that could take off exponentially like it did in the Book of Acts. But that doesn't mean that the Holy Spirit is limited or gone. The Holy Spirit is still alive and active. And there's still plenty of good that can be done in and for and through us who are willing to receive the promise and benefits of the gift of the Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup>Hafiz, a Sufi poet in the 1300s.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.umnews.org/en/news/umcor-aids-displaced-people-in-congo>

<sup>3</sup>Henry Tweedy, "O Spirit of the Living God," 1935.