

SERMON TITLE: "The Gift of the Holy Spirit"

SERMON TEXT: Acts 2:37-42

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: May 28, 2023, (Pentecost, Heritage/Memorial Sunday) at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

What a big day this is for us! To honor those who have been members for 50 years or more is a joy. Then to remember those dear ones who have passed on ahead of us and to dedicate memorials in their honor is another celebration. And, then, because of the way the church calendar falls this year, today is also the Day of Pentecost. Today is the day we remember the Holy Spirit coming upon the Christian believers with wind and fire—and with a diversity of languages that enabled them to share the good news with people of every land. So many people became believers that day that we call it the "birthday of the church."

On that Day of Pentecost, Peter stood up and proclaimed the story of Jesus—the one who performed miracles, who was crucified, and who was raised from the dead. Peter called his Jewish people to repentance for their role in condemning Jesus, and he offered them the opportunity to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. On this Day of Pentecost, I'd like us to think about what that meant to those earliest Christians and what it means for us, too, when we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

1—THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE OPPOSITE OF SIN

What we see in Peter's message is, first of all, that the Holy Spirit is the opposite of sin. The Holy Spirit comes upon and into us when we repent of our sins and get cleaned up in baptism. When all our guilt is washed away—not only from the surfaces, but from all our cracks and crevices too—then the Holy Spirit comes upon us to fill those voids with the heart and soul of Jesus. The Holy Spirit is such a gift to us because being a Christian isn't just the absence of evil. It isn't just a boring and blah existence. The Holy Spirit is a replenishment of life and goodness. It is a life full of abundant and holy benefits.

I like how this is described, not only here in Acts 2, but also in the New Testament letter to the Colossians, chapter three. There, the Apostle Paul tells the Christians at Colossae first to put away all sin and disobedience to God. He tells them to rid themselves of impurity, greed, anger, malice, lies, and abusive language. As Paul instructs them to strip off those old ways of life, he uses the imagery of ancient baptisms, in which the repentant ones would strip off their old, dirty clothes and enter into the baptismal waters completely naked. It was good to get their sins washed off. But they didn't stay there. Those new believers would then come out of the baptismal water and put on a new white robe. The apostle used this baptismal imagery to describe their new Christian clothing of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Their new garments of holiness would include forgiveness, love, peace, and gratitude.

Similarly, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Galatia that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). Paul explained to them that, after repentance, Christians are to live a new kind of life, a life that is guided by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So, the gift of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and ever since then has been more than the absence of sin. We don't repent of exciting sins just to then become plain and boring people. If we were to describe this numerically, we wouldn't go from a negative 10 of sin to a zero. No! We would go from a negative 10 of sin to a positive 10 of Holy Spirit living! The wind, fire, and languages at Pentecost remind us that there is a lot of excitement in a Holy Spirit-filled life. By producing in us an abundance of wonderful qualities and benefits, the gift of the Holy Spirit is the opposite of sin.

2—THE HOLY SPIRIT IS A POSITIVE PROMISE

In Acts 2:39, we find further information about the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a positive promise. Not only is the Holy Spirit a gift that begins changing *our* lives right away; it's also a gift that has positive effects upon our children and grandchildren, and upon our neighbors near and far. The gift of the Holy Spirit impacts our lives so thoroughly that its influence grows and spreads. It's like Jesus'

parable of the mustard seed. Even though it's tiny, it grows into a bush so large that the birds build their nests in it.

When we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and allow it to infuse us with compassion, peace, and joy, those attributes and actions flow out of us into our families, into our workplaces, into our schools and social groups, into our communities, and into our world. Whether everyone around us embraces Christian faith or not, they will absolutely benefit from the fruit of the Spirit which is growing in us. When we practice patience instead of anger and generosity instead of greed, there is hope for the future.

This past week, in an article I was reading, I came across the saying that "Hurt people hurt people." That's a quick way of explaining that, when someone has been traumatized and victimized, they often then perpetrate that abuse on others. Sadly, hurt people often do hurt people. But the Holy Spirit is the opposite of sin, right? So, I would say that the gift of the Holy Spirit also makes it true that healed people heal people. When the Holy Spirit enters into our hearts and fills us with love, compassion, gentleness, and joy, then we Christians become a healing power in our families and in our society. When we cease to be mean-spirited and instead become kind-spirited, then the world around us is made better. The future is brighter for this generation and all the generations that follow.

I know we have a tendency to doubt ourselves. We think that we have very little power. But do you remember what Jesus said to his disciples before he was crucified? In John 14, Jesus assured them that, after he was gone, he would send his Spirit to them. Jesus said that, through the advocacy of the Holy Spirit, the disciples would "do even greater things" than he had done. Jesus wasn't only talking about his immediate 12 disciples. His words apply to us today, as well. The gift of the Holy Spirit is a positive promise.

3—THE HOLY SPIRIT UNITES US AS CHRIST'S BODY

So, the gift of the Holy Spirit is the opposite of sin. After sin is removed from our lives by repentance and baptism, the Holy Spirit fills us up with the goodness of God. That makes it possible for us

to have a positive impact on our families and the world around us. It also makes it possible for us to be united in faith. As we devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers, we enrich one another's faith, and we are united as the body of Christ.

Many of you have memorized our church's vision statement and can recite it with me: *"First United Methodist Church will meet spiritual needs by developing relationships with Christ, community, and the world."* Today we have the same idea as those earliest Christians on the Day of Pentecost. We meet spiritual needs by connecting with one another. By developing our relationships with Christ, we grow in spiritual maturity. By sharing our individual gifts of the Spirit, we grow the church and its ability to impact the community and the world.

This idea of unity through the Holy Spirit is also found in Ephesians 4. There we read that each of us is given individual gifts that, when shared with one another, enhance the growth of the church. What are those gifts? Ephesians tells us that some are given the gift of being apostles, those who are sent out with the message of Christ. Others are given the gift of prophecy, which means the ability to see what should be done now so the best possible future can unfold. Some are given the Holy Spirit gift of evangelism, which means sharing the good news of Jesus as a positive-life-enhancing message. Some are given the Holy Spirit gift of serving as pastors who guide the flock. Others have been given the gift of teaching. To the gifts named in Ephesians 4, we could add that some have been given the spiritual gifts of making music, managing the church's finances, maintaining the church's building and grounds, and praying for the church's sick.

In 1 Corinthians 12, as well, the Apostle Paul described those who have received gifts of the Spirit as members of one united body. All the members are essential to the functioning of the body, wrote Paul. Whether prominent or unseen, these body parts have spiritual gifts that are valuable and necessary.

Of course, gifts of the Holy Spirit can only benefit the body of the church when they are shared. That's why the Holy Spirit has given them. None of these gifts is meant to be hoarded. When they are

brought together for the good of the whole church, that's when the church has the best chance of growing up into Christ as one united body.

CONCLUSION

In this week's news, I heard a story about a wealthy man who, on Thursday, gave \$1000 to every student graduating from the University of Massachusetts in Boston. In a big surprise and to much happy shouting and applause, each of those 2500 students received one envelope containing a \$500 gift for them to keep for themselves and a second envelope containing \$500 for them to give away to an organization or individuals in need.

To me, that seems like the way God sent the gift of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. In a big and exciting surprise, the Holy Spirit came with wind, fire, and languages. There was preaching, repentance, baptisms, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, so that 3000 new people became believers. On that great day that the church was born and ever since, God has given this gift so that sin would be replaced with spiritual fruit, so that life would be improved for generations to come, and so the church might be unified and built up for ministry in the world. On *this* day of Pentecost, may we so receive and share the gift of the Holy Spirit!