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Pentecost – Acts 2:37-47 - The Spiritual Life of the Church
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They call it the birthday of the Christian Church – the day when the New Testament Church really, truly, fully came to life. It was the day of Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus’ resurrection, 10 days after Jesus’ ascension. As I said earlier, it was the day when Jews normally gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate a harvest of grain in Israel, but this time they would celebrate something even greater – a worldwide harvest of souls.

It was early that morning when suddenly the Holy Spirit came in tongues of fire and a sound like the blowing of a violent wind, and ever since then this world has never been the same. It was that day when spiritual life was infused into God’s Church throughout the world like a shot in the arm, and even to this day the Spirit who worked miracles in Acts 2 works those same miracles in the hearts of his people here in 2023. On that greatest day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came to inaugurate the life and mission of the Church until the end of time. He gives us that life through his Word and his Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, and he calls us to a life of worship, fellowship, prayer, and service.

And it was the Apostle Peter who first got to share that message and bring the whole picture of the spiritual life of the Church clearly into focus. This was not so long, remember, after Jesus rose from the dead and went back to heaven. Well, Jesus promised before he left that he would send the Holy Spirit to testify about him, and Pentecost made good on that. Peter preached to the people that day that our Lord Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of all the promises of the Old Testament; he was the one whom God sent to be our Messiah, our true Savior from sin; and through his death at the hands of the Jews and his triumphant resurrection on Easter morning, he won for us life spiritual, life eternal, life immortal that no one can ever take away. He is both Lord and Christ, Peter said, and the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost to testify to that fact for us and for the world.

It was exactly the message that sinners need to hear – a message of Law and Gospel, of repentance and forgiveness. Yes, even we need to hear right along with the Jews that it was *our* sins of thought and word and deed that sent Jesus to that cross, and there is nothing *we* can do on our own to make it right or make it better. We need to hear that message that condemns us to death so that we’ll ask, too, “*Brothers, what shall we do?*” We need to hear the message of sin so that we can hear the message of sins forgiven. We

need to hear the message of death so we can hear the message of death defeated. We need to hear the message of condemnation deserved so we can hear and appreciate and marvel fully at the so-much-greater message of love undeserved that sent Jesus into this world to save us from it all.

See, once we ask that question – *what shall we do?* – the Holy Spirit is always there to deliver the answer: “*Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.*” Through his Means of Grace – his *Gospel* message, his good news about Jesus that comes to us through his Word and Sacraments – the Holy Spirit brings life to his Church free of charge, to anyone who will hear his call and believe his promise. Holy Scripture, Holy Baptism, and Holy Communion are the tools the Holy Spirit uses to work faith in our hearts and deliver to us God’s greatest spiritual gifts. Through the Word he points us to Christ and everything he did to save us, and he promises his guidance and help as we walk with Christ down the path to heaven. Through baptism he washes away our sins and makes us God’s own children and heirs of his heavenly kingdom. Through the Lord’s Supper – “the breaking of bread” that’s mentioned here a little later – he gives us forgiveness for sin, the fellowship of family, and a foretaste of forever at the Lamb’s heavenly banquet feast one day. Through his Means of Grace, the Holy Spirit gives life to his Church by connecting us to Christ and delivering to us God’s most precious promises of forgiveness and eternal salvation.

So “*what shall we do?*” We shall use God’s Word and Sacraments regularly and often! The blessings are here for the taking, and the Holy Spirit is ready and waiting and eager to give them. So come to church, come to Bible study, have personal devotions at home, prioritize time for the Word in your life! If you haven’t been baptized – or if your children or grand-children haven’t – then why wait? There’s no time to lose! Grow in faith through the Word, find grace in the waters of Holy Baptism, and then in spiritual maturity and unity, come to the Lord’s Table again and again to feed your soul with his own body and blood, given just for you. Just as our bodies need breath and water and food to live, it’s just the same with our souls. So love the Means of Grace, friends – God’s Gospel in Word and Sacraments, and by the Holy Spirit’s power live through them and live for them!

Or in other words, maybe the best way I can put it is to follow the example of the believers at Pentecost: “*They devoted themselves to the apostles’*

teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer... All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need."

If God's Word and Sacraments are spiritual food that the Holy Spirit uses to give life to the Church, then what's described here is great spiritual exercise that the Holy Spirit works through us to live that life to the fullest. The first thing you see here is *worship*. This is what believers do, the most central, vital function that makes us who we are – we come to the Lord's house together to offer him our united praise and honor and thanksgiving. It is here at the Lord's house where his Word is preached and his Sacraments are administered; it is here at the Lord's house where you can *devote* yourselves like nowhere else to finding spiritual peace and strength and guidance for another week; it is here at the Lord's house where you meet other Christians who are going through the same things you are and gather together for mutual encouragement and support and witness to this world.

And then that also goes into the second thing you see in the Church at Pentecost: *fellowship*! These people loved each other and loved being around each other. Even if they didn't know each other, even if their personalities didn't really mesh, even if they had nothing in common otherwise, they still had the most important thing in common: their Spirit-worked faith in Jesus Christ, and that was more than enough. They wanted to divide their sorrows and multiply their joys, to shoulder each other's burdens and share each other's delights – and their Christian fellowship provided the perfect opportunity.

And my brothers and sisters, that's no different now than it was then. So don't think like too many do nowadays that coming here to church regularly isn't as important anymore in a freer and more technological age. Don't be fooled into thinking you can worship just as well in a bass boat or in a tractor or in a tree stand or at a sporting event somewhere or even at home on your couch if you could otherwise be here in person, and don't let the devil convince you that church is just for holier-than-thou hypocrites, because the truth is that nothing is more hypocritical than so-called Christians harboring attitudes like those. I mean, where else does Jesus himself promise, "*Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them*"? Where else can you come to the font or the Lord's Table? Where else can you stand shoulder-to-shoulder in solidarity to worship God and build up your fellow Christians? Where better can you show the world your commitment to Christ, who your true Father is, and where your real hope lies? Nowhere than right here, in God's house every week.

But actually, that's not even everything the Holy Spirit works in our lives. He also moves us to *pray* and to *serve* one another in love. If our God promises that the prayer of even one righteous person is powerful and effective, how much more when we join our voices together! Our God promises to hear us, to answer for our good, and to consider our cares and desires as he rules this world. What an amazing promise from the God of heaven and earth! When we pray for each other and join our voices in prayer together, we are utilizing one of God's greatest promises to us, one of the most powerful tools he's given us in this life, and we are showing God that we trust him to answer in the way that is best.

But when you pray, be prepared that God might just use you and your gifts as the answer to that prayer as well. That's where service comes in. The people in our lesson were willing to give the shirt off their back to help someone in need, and our God wants us to have that same kind of willingness to serve our neighbors. So if your service is through donations in the offering plate, then do it generously. If it's through volunteering, do it faithfully and willingly. If it's through personal care and counsel and encouragement, then give it wisely and tactfully. Whatever it is, your God wants you – yes, every single one of you! – to contribute to his service, to his *mission* in a positive and beneficial and God-glorifying way. It is the Spirit who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose, and whatever gifts he's given us, he gives us not to be hoarded but to be shared and to be a blessing to others. That's how the Spirit works real life through us, and that's how the world will see the love of Christ in us.

Yes, that Pentecost church in Acts 2 really was something special, and a great example to strive for. But the truth is, the Spirit can do those same great things in us and through us even here and now. See, we might not see those great signs at Pentecost anymore – the tongues of fire, the rushing wind, spontaneously speaking all those different world languages. But the most important aspect of Pentecost is still very much present here with us, because still today the Spirit gives life to his Church through his Word and Sacraments, and he works in us to live that life to the fullest through worship, fellowship, prayer, and service. The church in Acts 2 seemed great, and it was. But not any greater than we can be, friends – with Jesus' blessing and by the Spirit's power – here at Good Shepherd, Beaver Dam 2023. Yes, with the Holy Spirit giving us life and giving purpose to our lives, I'd say that's reason to celebrate. So Church of Christ, happy birthday! Amen.