

# **A Meditation on the Holy Spirit, Following Jesus, and 2012**

A sermon delivered by Wendell Griffen, Pastor, New Millennium Church, Little Rock, Ark., on May 27, 2012.

## **John 15:26 - 16:15**

26“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. 27You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

16“I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. 2They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. 3And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me. 4But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them. “I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. 5But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ 6But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts.

7Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. 8And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: 9about sin, because they do not believe in me; 10about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; 11about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. 12“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. 13When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. 14He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. 15All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

## **Acts 2:1-21**

2When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." 12All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 13But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

14But 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. 15Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. 16No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 17'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. 18Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. 19And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. 20The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. 21Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Pentecost is unlike Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter. Advent season is observed by followers of Jesus as a time of preparation and expectation for the coming of Christ. Christmas celebrates the fact and meaning of God taking on humanity in Christ. Lent is a time when followers of Jesus focus on the reality of human sinfulness, our need for salvation, and how God has graciously provided that salvation. During the Easter season we proclaim the power of resurrection

and the victorious message that God's love overcomes the powers of sin and death.

Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter are more popular observances than Pentecost. Retailers depend on the Advent season for much of their business revenue. Family traditions often develop around Christmas. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and is preceded by Mardi Gras revelry. The clothing industry looks to showcase springtime fashionable garments around Easter and families plan Easter egg hunts.

Pentecost is different. It's probably true that most congregations plan special worship and other activities for Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter. Pentecost doesn't get that level of attention. The Day of Pentecost and the Pentecost season often come and go without mention. That would be unthinkable concerning Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter.

Perhaps we who are followers of Jesus don't place as much attention on Pentecost Sunday—marking the birth of the Christian church movement—and the Pentecost season because the Holy Spirit is central. There is no Bethlehem story we can talk or sing about the Holy Spirit. Easter Sunday comes at the end of Holy Week which begins with Palm Sunday. But we don't have a crucifixion to preach about concerning the Holy Spirit.

People are mystified by the Holy Spirit. The question voiced in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost—*"What does this mean?"*—is as relevant in the 21st Century as it was when Peter responded to it that day in Jerusalem. When people talk about "living by the Spirit," "being led by the Spirit," and acting "in the power of the Holy Spirit," we risk being considered strange even by other religious people.

So this sermon is a meditation on the Holy Spirit, the least recognized aspect of God's presence among and activity with us.

**The Holy Spirit is God's presence in us and the world for Christ.** The Holy Spirit fulfills the promise Jesus made that his followers would not be abandoned. Jesus returned to God. Followers of Jesus remain in the world facing the forces of sin and death. We cannot confront those forces in our own strength.

The Holy Spirit is God's presence in us and in the world to continue what Jesus did. Because of the Holy Spirit, followers of Jesus have the power to confront and

overcome the forces of sin and death.

- The Holy Spirit equips us to recognize those forces at work in and around us.
- The Holy Spirit gives us moral and spiritual authority to confront wickedness in ourselves, in others, and in the systems and situations of our time and place.
- The Holy Spirit reminds us that we are God's people in Christ.
- The Holy Spirit challenges and corrects our small-minded assumptions and notions about what living for God means in our time and place.
- *The Holy Spirit calls us to become and leads us in being the Church of Jesus Christ for God's glory!*

We can learn much and be strengthened mightily from how the Holy Spirit empowered Peter and the other men and women who followed Jesus to become public agents of God's grace and truth in their time and place.

**The Holy Spirit gives us confidence in our identity as followers of Jesus Christ.** Peter and the other followers were frightened and uncertain before Pentecost. They were afraid to be openly identified as followers of Jesus. They were afraid to talk about Jesus. They were afraid to challenge their time and place with the good news of God's grace and truth that Jesus exemplified. They were frightened, uncertain, and reclusive until the Holy Spirit showed up at Pentecost to affirm and confirm God's presence in and with them in the world for Christ.

But the Holy Spirit demonstrated at Pentecost what God's presence in people like us and in the world does and promises. The Holy Spirit makes us confident in our identity and moral authority as agents of God's grace and truth. The Spirit gives us the confidence to speak life, resurrection, and new purpose to the "dry bones" circumstances of our own lives and time. We become "church" as we live out our identity as followers of Jesus led by the Holy Spirit.

**The Holy Spirit is the answer to our resources concerns about how we'll do what God wants done.** Peter and the other followers had no idea how they would communicate the good news of God's grace and truth to people who spoke different languages. They didn't summon a conference or convocation. The Holy Spirit empowered Peter and the other Jesus followers to communicate the gospel

of God's grace and truth in obedience to Christ. Like a United Nations session, somehow people who spoke different languages heard the gospel in their heart language. The Spirit brought preachers and hearers together.

One lesson you and I should take from Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit deals with our resources issues. God provides the resources we need to accomplish God's purposes. We can trust God for those resources while admitting that we don't understand how God does it. Knowing that God has provided in past situations gives us confidence that God will provide what we need to face current and future situations. The Holy Spirit is in charge of supplying what we need.

That's a liberating truth that dispels the false economy of scarcity and replaces it with a sense of super-abundance. God has more than enough to meet our needs. God will supply all our needs accordance to God's super-abundance. The Holy Spirit will distribute to us what we need so we can use what we receive to fulfill God's grace and truth in the world.

But people who are out of touch with the Holy Spirit can't realize this truth. Because they don't understand God's grace, they try to hoard for themselves and fear that others will take what they have. They live and act as if God hasn't given, won't provide, or doesn't have enough sense or stuff to provide. Their religion is not Spirit-led, Spirit-fed, or Spirit-bred. It is religion based on personal power, not God's Spirit in obedience to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

This may explain why many religious people claim to be social and fiscal conservatives. Somehow they've missed the message of Pentecost. They've missed the communitarian life that we read about in Acts. They've missed the meaning of many people being fed by Jesus with a boy's lunch. They've missed the meaning of Lazarus being raised from the dead. They don't understand that the same Spirit that empowered Jesus to provide free healing in his time desires make healing available and free even in our time.

People who become religious without the Holy Spirit may become "conservative" because they don't live in the power and under the influence of God's super-abundant grace. Truth for them is narrow. Diversity is dangerous. They are disciples of scarcity, not super-abundant grace and truth. They fear the extravagant grace of God that Jesus exemplified and Pentecost displayed.

There's nothing "conservative" about God's grace. The Holy Spirit that blessed a

boy's lunch so that thousands were fed with leftovers to spare can't be the basis for "austerity" approaches to living that shuts down safety net services for vulnerable people. We have a liberating faith because God is liberal in forgiveness, liberal in deliverance, liberal in salvation, and liberal in the Holy Spirit.

**The Holy Spirit continues and fulfills the God's work of redemption, resurrection, and reconciliation in us and in the world.** What started as a closed-door prayer meeting of closeted Jesus followers from Galilee resulted in a multi-lingual assembly of devout people hearing about God's grace and truth because of the Holy Spirit.

As Peter explained, the Holy Spirit enables us to transcend our differences as we glorify God. God does not demand that we become the same in order to be united. We can be in communion with each other and with God even in our diversity. Peter reminded the astonished audience that the unity of message they received in their various languages fulfilled ancient predictions about what God's Spirit would achieve. The Holy Spirit would bridge generational, gender, class, and cultural differences.

The 21st Century is as diverse as the First Century of the Christian era was. Followers of Jesus today can be timid, uncertain, and anxious like Peter and the others were long ago. In 2012, as in the First Century, followers of Jesus confront forces and situations that seem to be too big and foreboding to match. How can we be and achieve all that God needs and has called us to be and do?

Jesus answered that question for us in John's Gospel and the Holy Spirit confirmed it at Pentecost with Peter and the first followers. *When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. 14He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. 15All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*

By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are confirmed as followers of Jesus Christ. By the presence of the Holy Spirit, we have confidence to act as agents of God's grace and truth in our time and place. Because of the Holy Spirit we can be sure that God will supply what we need to fulfill God's plans for redemption,

resurrection, and reconciliation.

Today is Pentecost Sunday. We are followers of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Let us live and act with confidence in our calling and authority to fulfill the will of God in our time and place. The Spirit leads us. The Spirit equips and liberates us. The Spirit corrects and instructs us. The Spirit unites us. The Spirit transforms us. The Spirit makes us the Church to God's glory. Amen.