

Pentecost Year C: New Life in the Spirit
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“Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and we shall be created, and you shall renew the face of the earth.”

This is the church’s classic prayer at Pentecost, the day on which each year we celebrate and experience the gift of the Holy Spirit. Since the founding of this congregation in 1905, it’s possible that there has never been a greater need here for Pentecost.

Someone pointed out not long ago that about the same number of people are now worshipping here that participated in Atonement’s very first services. We are back to where we started. What does that mean for us?

We can look at it two ways.

Either our cycle of life is complete, much like how we begin life bald and toothless and end up in the same condition. I read in your January annual report a sentence about how it may well be time to close the doors, sell the building and move on with our lives.

Or, there is another way of looking at this cycle: That we have lived out our former purpose, to grow a worshipping body grounded in the principles the Lutheran tradition, and that God is now calling us something new. This definitely does not mean letting go of our great heritage of Lutheran worship and song. But at this point in history, Christ is calling us to a new way of being. It involves a 180-degree turn, from facing inward to opening our arms and doors out onto the world. Only from that stance can God’s Spirit blow through this church.

You have already begun to make this turn welcoming into this building with the Kingdom of God Is Within You ministry. The Spirit is *already* active here in a new way. That is the purpose of the red and orange streamers you may have noticed outside the building: They symbolize that, although we can't see the Spirit, we can detect its presence by what it is doing. And that's why our front door is open, in case anyone wants to come in and see what the Spirit is doing here.

But how is new life even possible, you might be wondering, with so few members remaining and even fewer coming to church on a regular basis?

I am here to tell you that God's purpose for the church in the world is not specifically for each congregation to have lots and lots of members. Of course, the bills must be paid. But you can have great numbers, and if people are mostly there to socialize or just to be seen, the body is not really alive. This why a church model based solely on membership growth is flawed. So let's forget about that for the time being.

The thing to notice here at Atonement is that we already have a solid foundation for new life. Unlike the Ohio congregation, each of you is giving all that you possibly can, and then some, to keep things going. And I recognize your fear that even that won't be enough. But the other big piece of good news is that, as I'm told, everyone who is here wants to be here.

So we need no longer focus on our failings. Have you heard the saying, "Argue for your shortcomings, and you get to keep them?" Instead, we open ourselves to what God through the Holy Spirit *can* do.

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What does God's living Word have to tell us about all this?

First, the Acts reading paints a vivid picture of the wider church as the body of Christ.

In verse 4 the apostles “were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the native language of each, as the Spirit gave them ability.” And yet everyone present understood exactly what they were saying, because somehow each discerned the babble clearly in his or her own language. Doesn’t this describe us, too? We speak different languages--not necessarily in grammar and syntax but in terms of our different backgrounds, perspectives, opinions, and approaches. Yet if we remain a unified body in Christ, we find that we are able to understand one another.

Then, in verse 17 the prophet Joel describes what our lives have been like. For many of you, these past several months must have seemed like the last, dark days. But now that you have welcomed in the Holy Spirit, new visions, new dreams, and new hopes are being stirred up.

And at this Acts end of the reading, we hear that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” This tells us that we need to pray. We need to be in constant conversation with God, and to pray boldly for what we need. We know that God answers prayer. In fact, in our Gospel reading from John, Jesus says in verse 13, “I will do whatever you ask in my name.”

What else do we notice in the John reading? Once again disciples seem clueless. They apparently don’t have any idea what Jesus is actually saying – that he and his Father are one and the same. This an important point because it addresses Jesus’ true identity. Just before this passage Jesus has said to Thomas, “If you know me, you will know my Father also.” Philip though, is not getting it. He demands to see the Father; maybe he wants to see whether they look like identical twins. But we know God and Jesus are one, for this is how we come to know

God--through Jesus, one who just like us has lived, breathed, and suffered, just as we have— one who is like us in every respect, except without sin.

Then in verse 12 of our Gospel reading we find this charge to us, to our community of faith: “The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.”

Through faith in Christ we proclaim the arrival of the kingdom of God, in which the rules of the old order have been turned upside down. The last come first; the meek will inherit the earth; and the rich will be sent away empty. Like Jesus, we invite the poor and hungry to the banquet. We break bread with sinners. Those who try to save their life by clinging to idols of power, money and control will actually lose it, and those who let go of these will find life, new life, eternal life in Christ. And we spread the message that God’s love, healing, and grace are for all people.

How are these *greater* works that Jesus did? Perhaps ours are greater in that we have known dark times. We have stared death in the face. Yet through this, we find that we are able to experience God’s grace and to share it with the world. Lord, send forth your Spirit! Stir us from placidness! Blow through our lives! Such is the power of the living God.

This is good news for God’s people. Amen.