

St. Timothy's Lutheran Church
Pastor Jonna Bohigian

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John 15:26 – 27; 16:4b – 15

The Spirit Is Here!

It was May 26, 1985 in Mt. Home, Idaho. The U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds were whizzing by overhead in beautiful, tight formation. First pass, second pass, third pass...they kept coming.

Down below, on ground level, my mom was huffing and puffing, shaking her fist at the sky. "How *dare* you perform drills on a day like today!"

My mom was at the Air Force hospital, working to deliver *me*. It was Pentecost Sunday. My parents have joked that my spunky personality came that day, with the convergence of Pentecost and the Air Force Thunderbirds.

Pentecost is a special Sunday, not just because I was *born* on Pentecost Sunday, but because it is the day on which we celebrate the birthday of the *Church*. It was Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples and they all spoke in different tongues. It was Pentecost when the disciples were empowered with the Holy Spirit to live out their mission to make disciples of all nations.

Pentecost is a day we celebrate every year in some form or another, yet many Christians are confused about the Holy Spirit, who birthed the Church that Pentecost 2,000 years ago. Some, in their confusion, avoid speaking about the Holy Spirit, whereas others elevate the Spirit above all else.

Problems arise with both dispositions. If we avoid the Holy Spirit, we remain stagnant in faith. We cannot respond to the movements of the Spirit in and around us. Faith feels boring, stagnant, unimportant, uniform. We don't expect God to speak

to us or to act *through* us, so our lives might look really busy, doing a lot of “good” things we think we should do as “good Christians.”

On the other hand, if we make our lives all about the Spirit, we can float along in our faith, unanchored to the Truth. We remain in waiting, until we feel prompted by the Spirit to do something. Faith can become all about our feelings and how we experience the Spirit. Faith feels unstable, emotional, other-worldly. We *expect* God to speak to us and to act through us, so we might experience a crisis of faith if we are not experiencing or feeling the Spirit.

My dad once pastored a Lutheran congregation who cared *so much* about the Holy Spirit, that everything else was secondary. When my dad spoke about pursuing the Great Commission, making disciples of all nations, he got pushback. The Great Commission wasn't their concern; their concern was to experience the Holy Spirit and all the spiritual gifts.

The good news is that avoidance or singular pursuit of the Holy Spirit are *not* the only options, and Scripture is *not* silent about the Holy Spirit. Before Jesus was crucified, he had a conversation with his disciples, preparing them for what was to come. He told them that he was going to his Father, but he would not leave them alone as orphans. He would send them the Helper, the Spirit of truth.

In John chapter 14, Jesus provides a context for the work of the Spirit. In verse 6, Jesus tells his disciples, “I am the way and the *truth* and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Jesus says that *he* is the truth. He *is* the *truth*, and the Spirit he sends will be the Spirit of *truth*, the Spirit of *Jesus*. Now, Jesus is *not* the Spirit and the Spirit is *not* Jesus, but the Spirit is *of Jesus*. And so we confess

in the Nicene Creed, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son.”¹ The Spirit proceeds, or comes from, the Father and Jesus, the Son, and the Spirit is eternal, as are the Father and the Son. The Spirit is not Jesus, yet the Spirit will come from Jesus and the Father. And “the Spirit will [tell] the Church what the Lord Jesus knows the Father wants said to the Church.”²

In chapter 14, verse 16, Jesus tells his disciples that he will “ask the Father, and He will give [them] *another* [Helper] to be with [them] forever – *the Spirit of truth.*” The Father will send *another* Helper. The Father has sent Jesus, the Helper, and the Father will send *another* Helper, the Spirit of truth. As Jesus carried out the will of the Father, so the Spirit carries out the will of Jesus. In other words, the Spirit’s primary task is to keep the Church “centered... in Jesus – in his Word, his Work, and his Person. ‘The poor Holy Spirit,’ Luther said once in only semi-jest, ‘doesn’t know any other subject.’”³ If you wonder if what you are hearing if of the Spirit, ask yourself, *Is this consistent with Jesus and his message in Scripture?*

The amazing thing is that Jesus not only promises his disciples the Holy Spirit, he promises that the Holy Spirit will do his work through *them*. Jesus promises that this incredibly flawed group of disciples, now you and me, will be the vessels through which the Spirit will do his work.

The Church is a flawed and sinful place. We know we are all sinful and yet we all have our opinions on the “perfect” church. Some “church shop” until they find

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_versions_of_the_Nicene_Creed

² Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John*, 930.

³ Bruner, 786.

just the right church with good preaching, inspiring music, big children's programs, and kind people. And then once we are there for a while, the preaching is no longer that good, the music uninspiring, children's programs dwindle, and the once-kind people are just as unkind as we are. We know others who have simply chosen to avoid the whole "church thing," and live out their faith on their own.

It is a *wonder* that the Church has been around all these years! It is truly a *miracle* that despite ourselves, and in light of all of our differences, God has chosen to do His work through *us*, His Church. As theologian Walter Brueggeman once wrote, "God gathers together folk like us, rich and poor, liberal and conservative, willing and reluctant, slave and free, and bids all sign on for odd songs and hard commands. In that way a community is formed like none other in the world."⁴

The Spirit is here, and is speaking. The Spirit is here and is speaking to and through us. Through us, the Spirit convicts the world of "guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment," and guides us into all truth, into Jesus (Jn 16:8, 13b). He will continue to guide us, the Church, and tell us what is to come, so that we can speak the truth of Jesus in every age.

The Holy Spirit speaks the truth of Jesus through the Church. What a holy and awe-full calling we have!

In his book, *The Kingdom of God Is a Party*, Tony Campolo offers a glimpse of what the truth of Jesus looks like. Late one night, he made his way to a diner that could have been called "The Greasy Spoon." The place was dirty and the staff gruff,

⁴ Walter Brueggeman, *Texts Under Negotiation*, Kindle location 513.

but in his desperation to get a little something in his system, he ordered a cup of coffee and a donut.

At 3:30am, the front door swung open and a group of boisterous prostitutes marched in. He writes, "It was a small place, and they sat on either side of me. Their talk was loud and crude. I felt completely out of place and was just about to make my getaway when I overheard the woman beside me say, 'Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be 39.'

"Her 'friend' responded in a nasty tone, 'So what do you want from me? A birthday party?...Ya want me to get you a cake and sing 'Happy Birthday'?"

"'Come on,' said the woman sitting next to me. 'Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all...I was just telling you it was my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?'"

"When I heard that, I made a decision. I sat and waited until the women had left. Then I called over the fat guy behind the counter, and I asked him, 'Do they come in here every night?'"

"'Yeah!' he answered.

"'The one right next to me, does she come here every night?'"

"'Yeah!' he said. 'That's Agnes. Yeah, she comes in here every night. Why d'ya wanta know?'"

"'Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday,' I told him. 'What do you say you and I do something about that? What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night?'"

“A cute smile slowly crossed his chubby cheeks, and he answered... ‘That’s great! I like it! That’s a great idea!’ Calling to his wife... he shouted, ‘Hey! Come out here! This guy’s got a great idea. Tomorrow’s Agnes’s birthday. This guy wants us to go in with him and throw a birthday party for her—right here—tomorrow night!’

“His wife came out of the back room all bright and smiley. She said, ‘That’s wonderful! You know Agnes is one of those people who is really nice and kind, and nobody does anything nice and kind for her.’

“‘Look,’ I told them, ‘if it’s okay with you, I’ll get back here tomorrow morning about 2:30 and decorate the place. I’ll even get a birthday cake!’

“‘No way,’ said Harry (that was his name). ‘The birthday cake’s my thing. I’ll make the cake.’

“At 2:30 the next morning, I was back at the diner. I had picked up some crepe-paper decorations at the store and had made a sign out of big pieces of cardboard that read, ‘Happy Birthday, Agnes!’ I decorated the diner from one end to the other. I had that diner looking good.

“The woman who did the cooking must have gotten the word out on the street, because by 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place...

“At 3:30...the door of the diner swung open, and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready...and when they came in we all screamed, ‘Happy birthday!’

“Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted so stunned so shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. Her friend grabbed her arm to steady her. As she was led to sit on one of the stools along the counter, we all sang

'Happy Birthday' to her. As we came to the end of our singing with 'happy birthday, dear Agnes, happy birthday to you,' her eyes moistened. Then, when the birthday cake with all the candles on it was carried out, she lost it and just openly cried.

"Harry gruffly mumbled, 'Blow out the candles, Agnes! Come on! Blow out the candles! If you don't blow out the candles, I'm gonna hafta blow out the candles.' And, after an endless few seconds, he did. Then he handed her a knife and told her, 'Cut the cake, Agnes. Yo, Agnes, we all want some cake.'

"Agnes looked down at the cake. Then without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, 'Look, Harry, is it all right with you if I I mean is it okay if I kind of what I want to ask you is is it O.K. if I keep the cake a little while? I mean, is it all right if we don't eat it right away?'

"Harry shrugged and answered, 'Sure! It's O.K. If you want to keep the cake, keep the cake. Take it home, if you want to.'

"Can I?' she asked. Then, looking at me, she said, 'I live just down the street a couple of doors. I want to take the cake home, okay? I'll be right back. Honest!'"

Agnes went home and Harry turned to Tony and asked, "Who are you?" "I'm a pastor." "No! What kind of pastor, what kind of church, throws birthday parties for prostitutes?" "The kind I'm a part of."⁵

St. Timothy's Lutheran Church, *we are* that kind of church! The Spirit is alive and active among us, moving to transform us into the church that looks like Jesus Christ, like a church that throws birthday parties for people like Agnes and like you and like me. Happy Pentecost!

⁵ <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2008/june/15742.html>