

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

June 28, 2023 (Day of Pentecost, Year A)
Acts 2:1-21

In our reading from Acts, from the Day of Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit was given like a rushing wind and like tongues of fire, and the church was given birth, there's a verse in there that's always amused me. After observing the disciples, some of the people sneered and said, "They're just filled with new wine." We are so quick to dismiss the work of the Spirit.

I heard about a pastor that was called to visit a man in the hospital. He put his hand on the man's shoulder said a prayer with him. Just as he said, "Amen," the man bolted straight up in bed with his eyes wide open. He said, "Thank you, pastor. I feel better. I think I'm healed. Then he got up out of bed and ran to the hallway shouting, "I'm healed. I'm healed."

The pastor was stunned. He didn't know what to say. He quietly slipped away and went back to his car. Then he said a prayer: "God...don't ever do that to me again."

We have such low expectations of the Spirit. Some years ago, I heard then presiding bishop of the ELCA, Mark Hanson, speak with a gathering of pastors. He said this is one the things that concerns him most about the church – that we have such low expectations. He asked pastors all over the country what they expect to happen when they preach the word. Guess what most of the pastors said...“nothing.” Folks, that more than cynicism; that's DISMISSING the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit changes people's lives, whether WE see it or not.

We discount the Spirit so easily. Even something as wonderful and miraculous as Pentecost ITSELF we dismiss as mere drunkenness, or coincidence, or chance. We're SUSPICIOUS of the Spirit.

We tend to get caught up in the gifts of the Spirit in this passage—the spectacle of the moment, the oo's and the ah's, the speaking in tongues and prophesying. But let's not miss the point. The REASON the disciples spoke in other languages wasn't for them; it wasn't so they could have a wild spiritual experience. They spoke in other languages for OTHERS; so people could hear about God in their OWN LANGUAGE, so they could UNDERSTAND. For the first time in their lives, these people were hearing the Word of God in words that made SENSE to them, in their HOME language. EACH person heard it in a way they UNDERSTOOD—and it struck home. It went right to their hearts.

This is how the spirit works – one person at a time. The Holy Spirit's flame burned in each of the disciples and it spread like a fire from person to person, branch to branch.

The Spirit has been given to every one of us in our baptisms, and if you haven't heard it by now, let me say it again: The Holy Spirit changes lives.

At a Global Mission Event I attended a years ago (2005 in Fargo), something remarkable happened. At one of the meals, I sat down at a table with an older couple who turned out to be retired missionaries. When they heard I was serving around Minot, ND at the time, the man said that his grandfather had lived in Minot. He told me a story. He said that his grandfather had been catholic, but he had some kind of falling out with the church and he swore he would never go back to church, and that applied to his whole family.

Well, at the time his son was just a boy, and one day he was out playing in the street with some other boys, and they asked him if he wanted to go to Sunday school with them. The boy said, "We don't go to church. I can't even ASK my dad that! He would just YELL at me!"

But his friend persisted and said, "Okay, I'LL ask him then."

They went to his house and his friend asked his dad, just like he'd said he would. The man said, "What church are we talking about here?"

"The Lutheran church, sir."

"Well, alright, he can go to the LUTHERAN church."

And from then on, the boy went to Sunday school every Sunday, and HIS son grew to become this missionary.

Now that ALONE was a great example of spreading the fire, but WAIT, there's MORE!

The missionary and his wife were dressed in traditional Liberian dress, where they had served for many years. As we were talking a woman from Liberia walked by and recognized it. She said, "Where did you GET that? I haven't seen one of those since I was a CHILD." We invited her to sit with us, and they shared stories about Liberia.

A little later, the missionary mentioned to me that he had also served in Peru. Now it had just so happened that ANOTHER couple had joined us at the table. And they said, "You were in Peru. We just CAME from there." And more stories followed.

And I thought, "This fire was started by one boy asking another to go to Sunday school. Who knows how many countless people's lives this man had touched as a missionary, all because of a little boy." That's a spreading fire.

Now someone might say, "I don't see the Spirit working in the church anymore." But I would have to disagree. At another church I served, one of my confirmation students told the class about something that happened to her. She had a classmate in school who didn't really believe in God. But a few weeks earlier that classmate asked this confirmation student why she was so happy all the time. And do you know how she answered? She said it was because of her faith in God. I said, "Girl, you're a witness! That's a testimony!" That's the Spirit's fire spreading from branch to branch.

I heard about another young family that started attending worship there. Let me tell you why. They had recently experienced some health problems in their family, and one of their friends, who was a member of the church (and notice which of those 2 categories I put 1st), one of their FRIENDS offered to bring their kids to Sunday school along with her kids. They accepted and the kids loved Sunday school. So when their health improved, the family came to worship. That's a fire, spreading from person to person.

You are a spirit-filled people. You have a fire burning inside you. It's growing, and its flames are reaching out. You don't have to speak in tongues. A simple kindness will do. A gracious word is all the Spirit needs.

Pentecost Sunday reminds us – FAN those flames. Amen.