

Gifts of the Spirit

Sermon: May 23, 2010
Pentecost Sunday

Texts: Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Acts 2:1-21; Romans 8:14-17; John 14:8-27

This morning we celebrate the birth of the Christian church. In the midst of flame and wind and spirit, the followers of Jesus are empowered to continue his ministry and mission. And as they begin to share that message with those gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish festival of Pentecost, they are amazed at how people begin to respond to that message. Even though there are many things that divide those people gathered, including race, language, and culture, they become one people. The Holy Spirit makes them one. The Holy Spirit helps them to see clearly the exciting possibilities of a world that follows the footsteps of Jesus Christ. And so they become the church; not a church made of bricks and mortar, but a church made up of people – the children of God. So today we celebrate Pentecost – the birth of the Christian church.

However, we also have the privilege to celebrate this morning the decision by eight young members of our congregation to make a public affirmation of their faith. They are here because they have been baptized into the Christian faith. They are here because their parents and the godparents promised to raise them in the faith. Those promises were kept when the parents of these young men and women brought them to Sunday school and Confirmation classes, where they could continue to grow in the Christian faith. Sometimes they came willingly; sometimes not so willingly. However, they are here today because they are ready to say, “yes.” Yes, I believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. They now have the primary responsibility for their own faith lives. From this point, they are considered to be adult members of our congregations, ready to receive all of the benefits and the responsibilities that are a part of a public faith life.

Let me tell you some things what they are not as they gather here this morning. First of all, they are not experts in the faith – for faith is an ongoing learning experience. We continue to learn and wrestle with this thing that we call faith until the day we die.

Second of all, they are not without doubt. There are some things that they are not sure about in their lives of faith. Like many of us, when we were their age, they are not sure what they think about the church. They are not sure if it is a place in which they feel completely welcome. They are not sure if we really mean it when we say that they are adult members of their congregation. They are not sure if the church really cares about them, and is really open to the gifts that they bring. So they come before you this morning with some doubts.

Let us also recognize that they are not comfortable this morning. Few of us like to draw attention to ourselves. Few of us like to stand up before others, and say, “This is what I think or believe.” And how comfortable is it to stand and have your picture taken in these confirmation robes?

So they come here this morning still growing in the faith, with a certain amount of doubt, and certainly not feeling very comfortable.

But not all of the important moments of our lives are perfectly clear in our minds as to what we think or feel about them. So this morning we will pray for the Holy Spirit to be a part of their lives, just as we pray that the Holy Spirit will be an ongoing part of our lives.

In a few moments we are going to invite these eight individuals forward and ask them to make their public affirmation of their faith by reciting with you the Apostles' Creed. Then we will ask them if it is their intention to actively live their faith lives in the world around them. And then we will pray for them with the words of this prayer:

Gracious Lord, through water and the Spirit you have made these men and women your own. You forgave them all their sins and brought them to newness of life. Continue to strengthen them with the Holy Spirit, increase in them your gifts of grace: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the Spirit of joy in your presence.

It is the words of this prayer that I would like to focus on in the remainder of this sermon.

In this prayer, we ask God to give them his gifts of grace. The prayer then goes on to list seven gifts of God's grace: wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, fear of the Lord, and joy. These are words that are taken from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. In their Old Testament context, they are words that are used to describe the gifts of the righteous one, the Messiah who will come to lead his people forth into a world of peace and justice. In our New Testament context, we understand that these are gifts that can be given to each one of us. For each one of us can be part of the royal priesthood, those who work together to lead each other forth into God's world of peace and justice.

The first two gifts are **wisdom and understanding**. We live in a world with so many choices, and not all of those choices are good for us. We live in a world in which we are tempted to do things that are not good for us, or for those around us. We live in a world that attempts to confuse us with visions of wealth, or power, or unhealthy pleasure. So how do we decide between one thing or the other? That is why we need the spirits of wisdom and understanding. Wisdom is not the same as knowledge. For knowledge is the accumulation of facts and figures, dates and events. But wisdom is the ability to act in a positive matter in accordance to the circumstances we face in our lives. Understanding is the ability to see the situations and circumstances clearly. With the gifts of wisdom and understanding, rooted in our faith in God, we will know how to live our lives and act in accordance to God's will.

The next two gifts are **counsel and might**. The spirit of counsel helps us to understand that we are not alone, that there is a community around us that can guide us in our lives. We must trust in the wisdom and understanding of others. The spirit of might speaks of power. But power as we understand it as Christians is not to control or

dominate others. Power is the ability to remain strong in the face of adversity and to actively work on behalf of God's peace and justice in the world.

The next two gifts are ***knowledge and the fear of the Lord***. None of us truly knows God completely. But the spirit of knowledge opens our minds and our hearts to that which God would have us know. We know that God is the source of life, who desires for us to live our lives abundantly. We know that God is the source of love, who desires for us to know his love for each one of us, and asks us to share that love with others. We know that God is the source of all being, who calls us to live lives authentically and to be all that God wants us to be. When we pray for the spirit of fear of the Lord, we do mean that we should be afraid of God. Perhaps a better translation would be to "stand in awe of God." God should never be the source of terror. God should always be the source of inspiration and amazement. We are amazed at what God has done in the past. We are amazed at what God is doing in our lives today. We are amazed at what God makes possible for our lives tomorrow. Our God is an awesome God.

Which brings us now to the ***Spirit of Joy***. When I was the same age as the young men and women sitting here, I did not experience the Spirit of Joy in my life, especially as a member of my home congregation. I saw a church filled with imperfect, sinful people, who didn't seem to care about who I was or what mattered to me. I thought worship services were boring. I thought the pastor talked too long in his sermons. I thought the pews were too uncomfortable. I didn't feel a lot of joy. And I would suspect that many of you are feeling the same thing right now.

Let me share with you, however, that, if you keep looking for this spirit of joy to come to you from the outside, from the people and the events of your lives, you will never find it. The spirit of joy comes from within. It comes in knowing the love of God. It comes in knowing that none of us is perfect, yet God forgives us anyway. It comes in choosing to see all that is good and beautiful in the world, instead of all that is wrong with the world. If you dwell upon what is wrong, you will never experience joy. But if you open yourself up to that which is good and beautiful, joy will find you. It will be a new way of seeing the world.

So these are the gifts that we pray for as you affirm your faith today. May God grant you and all of us the gifts of the spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and awe, and most of all joy.

Thanks be to God. Amen.