

Sermon “Empowered”
Reverend Lisa Eleck
Olivet Congregational Church, UCC
06/05/2022

John 14: 8-17, 25-27

8 Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’⁹ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”?’¹⁰ Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.¹¹ Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.¹² Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.¹³ I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.¹⁴ If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

15 ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments.¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

25 ‘I have said these things to you while I am still with you.²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

SERMON “Empowered”

I know you’re all familiar with the Pentecost story from the Acts of the Apostles. You know the one. The apostles are in an upper room, still anxious and reluctant to appear in public without Jesus. Can you blame them? Jesus had been crucified and even though he had risen, there was still uncertainty about the future. It would be normal to be afraid given all that had happened. But their self-isolation

was interrupted by a roaring wind that filled the house and “Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

Shaken up by the Spirit, the disciples opened those closed doors and burst out into the crowd that was gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish feast of Pentecost or “Shavout,” the Festival of Weeks. Now, Pentecost was originally a celebration of the harvest - fifty days after Passover. But after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, it shifted to a celebration of the fifty days from Passover to when Moses received the Torah – God’s Law - on Mount Sinai. It was a celebration of the guidelines for life that God gave to Moses. It was the reason that the crowd from across the ancient world had gathered on that Jewish holy day. But the appearance of the Holy Spirit would then make it a sacred day for Christians, a celebration of the Spirit and the birth of the Church.

Pentecost was the day that the Holy Spirit blew into the disciples’ lives and changed them forever. Filled with the Spirit, the disciples were energized to share their faith with the crowd of people in Jerusalem. And as the Holy Spirit had enabled them to speak to people in their own languages, different languages – the apostles shared the good news of Jesus to people from across the ancient world.

The disciples were so enthusiastic in their outreach that those people thought they were drunk. But Peter fixed that. He corrected their misconception. He let the crowds know that God had sent the Holy Spirit upon these men, quoting these words of the prophet, Joel:

“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.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit.” (Joel 2:28-29)

Joel had prophesied the appearance of the Spirit and the disciples had experienced the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Upon the old and the young, men and women, slaves and free persons, the Spirit was poured out and enlivened them

all. All people. The young would have visions and prophesize. Who says that youth are too young to speak truth to power? The old would dream dreams. Who says the old are too old to dream? Visions and dreams, these are God's will for his people. They are hope for a better world.

Not only would the Spirit awaken dreams and visions in those who believe, people would also experience an abundance of divine energy that would overflow to others across cultures and languages. That is the experience of the Spirit empowering those early followers of Jesus on that Pentecost morning.

Yet, in our reading from John's gospel, Jesus' words about the Spirit do not radiate enthusiasm and divine energy. Rather, Jesus' words are part of his farewell words to his disciples. He is trying to prepare them for his death and his departure from this world but also to reassure them that they will not be alone. He will have his Father send another Advocate, the Spirit of truth.

Jesus is comforting his friends, who will grieve and feel lost when he dies. He knows that they will be sad and confused upon his death. Even though he will conquer death, he will still return to his Father. So Jesus tells his friends that the Spirit that his Father will send in his name will be an Advocate who will abide with them and in them. The Advocate, that Spirit of truth, will be one with them and in them. As an Advocate, the Spirit will inspire them, guide them, and give them courage. The Spirit will teach them and remind them of all that Jesus has told them and continue to show them the way of Jesus.

The Spirit in the upper room at Pentecost and the Spirit that Jesus speaks of is the same Spirit. That Spirit is the same One who was God's breath breathed into creation, was with John the Baptist, came upon Mary, filled Zechariah, guided Simeon, and came upon Jesus as a dove at his baptism, led him into the wilderness, and stayed with him throughout his ministry. That Spirit was and is present to all of creation, to each individual, and to communities that choose to walk in the way of Jesus.

As Jesus prepared his friends for his death, he knew they would need compassion, reminders of this presence with and in them, support to continue to follow in his ways. Once they were reassured of his presence, only then could they begin to move forward. And on that Pentecost morning, the Spirit arrived full force, with

wind and tongues of fire - enabling them to move forward, to move beyond themselves as frightened individuals and become an empowered community.

The Spirit sent them out into the crowd, just as Jesus had sent them into the Judean countryside. But Spirit also enabled them to speak different languages, so that Jesus' story – the story of his life, death, resurrection and the Truth of his love for all people could be shared across the barriers of nationality and language.

As we celebrate Pentecost Sunday, we recall the movement of the Spirit. For those who grieve, the Spirit of our Risen Lord accompanies, comforts, and strengthens us, reminds us of Jesus' loving presence in our grief.

For those who are followers of Jesus as a community of believers, as churches, the Spirit empowers us to share the good news of Jesus with the world:

that God so loved the world that God became human in the person of Jesus and to share Jesus' message.

- Jesus message of God's abiding love for all people especially where there is prejudice and hate - that we are all God's beloved children regardless of our race, nationality, faith traditions, sexual orientation or gender identity
- Jesus' message that God calls us to work for unity – welcoming strangers, outcasts and refugees, building bridges rather than walls.
- Jesus' message to forgive one another just as he forgave those who crucified him and forgives us for those times we fail to live in love
- Jesus' message that God desires that we serve one another, especially the children and the vulnerable, even if it means upsetting the status quo

On this Pentecost Sunday, we recall that Jesus sent the Holy Spirit, “the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” The Spirit abides in us - that same Spirit that blew into the lives of Jesus' friends and lit a fire in their hearts so that they could not help but to share the message of Jesus. That Spirit is alive today – abiding in us. We believe that our God is still speaking and still working even in our divided, troubled, hurting world, speaking and working through the Spirit and through us as followers of Jesus. The Spirit empowers us as Christians to bring the Good News of Jesus' love and hope to our world..

As the Holy Spirit continues to pour herself out upon the Christian church, may we continue to ask what dreams we dream for our God, how we envision building God's kin-dom, and how will we speak the truth of Jesus message of love to power. Perhaps our dreams include supporting foster children by filling backpacks or tying blankets or neighborhood children by making gingerbread houses. Perhaps we envision a world where Muslims and Christians better understand each other by respectfully sharing our different understandings of scripture or by attending interfaith rallies or services. Perhaps we share food with the hungry, the vulnerable, in Bridgeport and beyond and support programs that attempt to address the root causes of hunger.

What are your dreams for yourself and this church? If we trust in the Spirit, she will guide us. I invite you to take the red flame that is in your bulletin home. Pray with it, asking the Spirit to pour herself upon you as you dream.

Come, Holy Spirit, Come!