

# Who's Got Spirit? We've Got Spirit!

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
June 9, 2019—The Day of Pentecost

- Acts 2:42-47 (Good News Translation) <sup>42</sup> They spent their time in learning from the apostles, taking part in the fellowship, and sharing in the fellowship meals and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> Many miracles and wonders were being done through the apostles, and everyone was filled with awe. <sup>44</sup> All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another. <sup>45</sup> They would sell their property and possessions, and distribute the money among all, according to what each one needed. <sup>46</sup> Day after day they met as a group in the Temple, and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God, and enjoying the good will of all the people. And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: God's Holy Spirit will empower and guide us all in this Sabbatical Summer.

A young woman is ready to board the plane for a year of study abroad. She's excited... but her parents, well, for them it's a mixed bag. On the one hand, they're thrilled for their daughter's opportunity to be an exchange student. She'll develop great language skills. The experience will broaden her mind and deepen her maturity. This immersive experience will give her a keen appreciation of that culture, and she'll likely develop greater appreciation for her own culture, too. For all that the parents are excited.

But there's still a part of them that's sad... and a little nervous. How will they get along without her? What will they do with this "new normal" of the daughter not being around, even if it is just for a while? Who'll do the early morning dog-walks each day? Make breakfast on Saturday mornings? Fix the computer? Their happiness for their daughter's opportunity can't completely wipe away their nervousness about what lies ahead.

Such times of change can cause some anxiety. A teacher at the local high school is taking a year's leave of absence for a Ph.D. program. She's thrilled about this opportunity and frankly, so is the school. But her students who she's had for one or two or three years? They are anxious, even sad that they are going to have to go on without her for a year—for some, for the *last* year of their high school career.

Yes, the uncertainty created by times of change can produce a measure of anxiety. It's true when your "baby" studies abroad or goes off to college or enlists in the military... or perhaps when the pastor of your church prepares to go away for a thirteen-week Sabbatical Summer.

What makes this time of rest and renewal and re-creation particularly special is the grant I was awarded from the Lilly Endowment's National Clergy Renewal Program. It's going to allow Mary and me not only to remove ourselves from the subtle, ever-present pressures of parish ministry; we'll be able to have refreshing and revitalizing experiences in extraordinary, far-away places. Many of you have told me how excited you are for us.

...But what about you? Just like that exchange student's parents were thrilled for *her* but had some anxiety for *themselves*, I know that, in the back of your mind, some of you wonder how this church will manage while I'm away. You usually don't have a reason to give it much thought, but now you wonder about all the things that happen behind the scenes that allow your church to be here for you week after week. Will all those things get taken care of? What will it be like to be in a worship service if Jon's not leading it? What if I were to need a pastor's care—who will be there to help me if I need it?

It occurs to me that there was a time when the followers of Jesus had thoughts like that. It happened after Jesus died. On the first day of the next week the news spread quickly among believers that his grave was empty and that he had been raised from death to life. They didn't know what to think; who'd ever heard of such a thing? All they knew was that their teacher, their source of inspiration and

comfort had been taken from them. Now they were without their leader. They hid behind locked doors of houses tucked away in the narrow streets and alleys of Jerusalem, unsure if the authorities would come after *them* just as they had come after Jesus. They didn't know what to do. They were nervous, uncertain, anxious.

What changed? They did. Inspiration came to them.

When I picked this day to be my last Sunday before entering the Sabbatical Summer I did it for practical, scheduling reasons. Only later did it dawn on me that this Sunday would fall on the Day of Pentecost. On Pentecost we celebrate the birth of the Church. As we heard, the believers were gathered in one place when God's Holy Spirit was sent upon them. How to describe that experience...? Imagine the sound of a ferocious wind. Imagine tongues of flame jumping and leaping from person to person, toying with them rather than torching them, spritely touching them with jolts of Holy Spirit power. Imagine enthusiasm erupting in a chorus of different languages all singing praise for God's goodness and power.

On Pentecost the body of Christ's followers received unmistakable confirmation: they had, indeed, been empowered by the Holy Spirit to continue Jesus' ministry. By whatever they said or did they were to proclaim that Jesus calls the world to repentance, that through trust in Jesus God forgives us of our sin.<sup>1</sup>

We're most familiar with the first part of the story of Pentecost in Acts Chapter 2 with the "mighty wind" and "tongues of flame" and "people speaking other languages." But that chapter ends with verses 42-47 describing how the community of believers was *changed* by the experience. Acts says, "All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another." It goes on, "Day after day they met as a group in the Temple and they had their meals together in their homes."<sup>2</sup>

In a nutshell, it was all about them remaining together.

- They worshipped together. Acts says day after day, week after week, they kept coming to the Temple to share in worship together.
- They learned from each other. They realized that their faith could be deepened by getting to know each other – whether or not they had leadership roles in the faith community. They sought to grow tighter as a community by learning one another's stories.
- They prayed for each other, for their families, their circles of friends, the world.
- They supported one another. That whole thing about "sharing belongings" and distributing money among the group – it was all about how they supported one another. They were attentive to the needs of one another and did what they could to care for each other.
- And oh, yes: they ate together. That had to be a natural consequence of getting to know one another better.

Because God had blessed them with the gift of the Holy Spirit, now they felt empowered to carry on the work of Jesus. And what the believers back in Jerusalem strove to do, that's our charge as well in the summer ahead: breaking down barriers that keep people apart; encouraging compassionate concern for friends and strangers; learning to forgive and learning how to be forgiven; and in all things worshiping and praising God the source of it all.

You're not merely biding your time sitting in a pew for a few minutes this morning; God's Holy Spirit is empowering you:

- Empowering you to act on our Mission Committee's invitation to join the City Mission's Homeless Stand-In at Public Square to show your concern for children in Cleveland who experience homelessness.
- The Holy Spirit empowers you to realize, "What have I got to lose?" then go up to an unfamiliar face some Sunday morning and introduce yourself (maybe even today!).
  - Take it another step – how about asking them to join you to get some coffee or ice cream or lunch or something?

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 28:47-49

<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:44, 46a Good News Translation

- The Holy Spirit's power will bless you with the good news being proclaimed in different ways as different voices share the gift of preaching throughout the summer ahead.

I looked back at the sermon I preached on the Sunday fifteen years ago when I was getting ready to start my previous Sabbatical Summer. On June 13, 2004 I envisioned a summer when this church would recognize its giftedness thanks to the power of God's Holy Spirit at work in you. I wrote,

Worship isn't a spectator activity; it's a conditioning exercise intended to [teach us] that our lives are not our own but are for God's service.

In other words, the life of the Christian community in a church like this is "continuing education." God's hope is that you learn to live in such a way that people might have to ask of you, "Are you sure you're not Jesus?"

So... I want the talk to be all about you, and how fully you embody the love of our Lord Jesus Christ as you assume the mantle of responsibility this summer. It's your turn to show not merely that you know about the church as the body of Christ; it's your turn to show that you are the body of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

All this will happen because of what we remember each year at Pentecost: God's Holy Spirit draws you together as a community of believers. It's all about being together! And if the testimony of the Acts of the Apostles is any guide – and I certainly believe it is – then here's what you can expect from your church during this Sabbatical Summer. As the last verse of Acts Chapter 2 states, they enjoyed "...the goodwill of all the people. And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved."

[sermons: se20190609; © 2019 Jon M. Fancher]

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<sup>3</sup> "Tag! You're 'It!'" a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher, Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio, June 13, 2004 – Sabbatical Send-Off Sunday