**The Church in the Power of the Spirit**

**Pentecost Sunday**

**June 4, 2017**

**“The Spirit of Pentecost” (Acts 2:1-13)**

**1. Introduction: Finding Your Voice**

For my generation, the original *Star Wars* movie (1977) had profound impact upon popular culture and imagination. Before the age of VCR’s, DVD’s or streaming, the only way to see a movie was to go to a movie theatre. I distinctly remember the excitement I felt as we finished the evening chores and my Dad and I went into Owen Sound to see *Star Wars*. The people were lined up around the block so we ended up on the balcony of the theatre, but that was okay because I desperately wanted to see this movie*.* Finally, the wait was over, the lights went down and that stirring theme music swelled up as the movie began. To me, the movie was pure magic and it sparked my love for the cinema and science fiction. There were so many memorable aspects of *Star Wars*, but perhaps the most compelling was the movie’s villain, Darth Vader. While his appearance was mysterious and imposing, it was his voice that was the most striking. Darth Vader’s deep, booming, and menacing voice was provided by a relatively unknown actor named James Earl Jones. Even though a mask hid Darth Vader’s face, Jones’ voice brought the character to life. James Earl Jones would go on to act and do voice work, but the voice of Darth Vader would be his defining role. This past year I was surprised to learn that this deep, resonating voice came from someone who struggled with stuttering as a young man.

From age six to fourteen James Earl Jones was virtually mute. He was so embarrassed by his stuttering that he only talked to a few family members and the animals on the farm he grew up on. His grandfather once said to him, "You had the most beautiful voice, and it was clear as a bell. What happened to it?" While Jones attributes his stuttering to the upheavals of his childhood, most experts think that many factors can contribute to stuttering. When Jones started high school, he still wasn’t talking. He began to write poetry and when his English teacher read one of his poems, his teacher said to him, “Jim, this is a good poem. In fact, it is so good I don't think you wrote it. I think you plagiarised it. If you want to prove you wrote it, you must stand in front of the class and recite it by memory.” So, Jones stood in front of the class, shaking with terror and straining to get the words out of his soul. Yet, when he opened his mouth, the words came out without a stutter. His English teacher, whom Jones now calls, “the father of my voice,” argued that if he was to be involved with words, it would mean that he would have to read them to the class and work on his stuttering problem. Over time, Jones reclaimed his voice; a voice that is now the one of the most recognizable in the world of film. Reflecting on this transformation, Jones has said, ““When I learned to talk, I reclaimed my voice from that long silence. I rediscovered the joy of communication.”

In many ways Christians are a little like James Earl Jones. We have these powerful words deep within our souls. We know that they are true, good, and life giving, yet we tremble with terror and strain to get them out. We feel stifled by a world that is hostile, but mostly indifferent to our message. We are stumped to know how to communicate to our neighbourhoods and communities. On this Pentecost Sunday we are reminded once again that God by his Spirit empowers each one of us to find our voice and proclaim the wonderful things he has done (Acts 2:11).

**2. The Arrival of the Holy Spirit**

(i) *Fulfilment: The Promise of the Spirit*

To fully understand the events of Pentecost one must look back to Jesus’ final words to his disciples in Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:4-8. In both these passages Jesus urges his followers to remain in Jerusalem until the Father fulfils his promise and gives them “power from on high.” Yet, Jesus’ disciples, thinking only of political kingdom, ask Jesus when he will restore the kingdom of Israel (1:6). In response, Jesus declares that these future events are in the hands of the Father (1:7). There was a much more pressing matter for his followers - the continuation of the mission, which Jesus began. This could only be done in the power of the Spirit - “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8).

Jesus’ words remind us that the Holy Spirit empowers the church for mission. The Holy Spirit enables Christians to be *witnesses*, proclaiming the good news about Jesus throughout the world. The story of the book of Acts portrays the the church engaged in mission, beginning in Jerusalem at Pentecost, but spreading out in an ever-widening circle to Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth with the Apostle Paul’s impassioned preaching in Rome. Yet the story of the church extending from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth began at Pentecost as Jews “from every nation under heaven” (2:5) heard the proclamation in their own native language (2:6).

The story of Pentecost is the story of a promise that was kept as God gave the power of his Spirit to the church to equip his people for mission. We may be tempted to say that this story is only applicable the first century during that first wave of Christian proclamation and growth. After all, we live in a different time and a different place. Yet, the church’s mission continues. Empowered by God’s Spirit we are his witnesses, beginning here in Don Mills, in the GTA, in Ontario, in Canada, and to the ends of the earth. God’s promise of the Spirit is as relevant today as it was on that first Pentecost so long ago.

(ii) *All-Embracing: Everyone was filled with the Spirit*

In obedience to Jesus’s words, a small group of his followers, numbering about 120 people (Acts 1:15), remained in Jerusalem and gathered together for prayer (1:15; 2:1). Luke notes that it was *Pentecost*; the Jewish religious festival celebrated fifty days after Passover, dedicating the first fruits of the wheat harvest to God (Exodus 34:22). Theologically, this may signify that the giving of the Spirit is the beginning or first fruits of God’s work of redemption that will culminate in the future (Romans 8:23). Luke also notes the auditory and visual phenomenon that accompanied the giving of the Spirit. The sound of a strong rushing wind filled the room where the Christians were gathered and “what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them” (Acts 2:2-3). Wind and fire are highly significant and very meaningful. Jesus breathed on his disciples and they received the new life of the Spirit (John 20:22) just as God breathed life into Adam at creation (Genesis 2:7). In the biblical tradition, fire is a sign of God’s presence. When God spoke to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:2). When the Israelites journeyed through the desert, God guided them with a pillar of fire (Exodus 13:21). Fire marks God’s glory and presence, which now rests upon God’s people by the Spirit. The presence of the wind and the fire make it clear that God himself took action at Pentecost to prepare his people for mission.

Yet, the empowerment for mission was not limited to the apostles or leaders of the church; it was for *everyone*. Throughout the passage the stress is on the involvement of all Christians. *All* of the Christians were together in the same place (2:1). The tongues of fire rested upon *each of them* (2:3). *Everyone* was filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak (2:4). It wasn’t just Peter and the apostles who were filled with the Spirit on that day; it was *all* the Christians! After the crowd’s mixed reaction to this event, Peter stands and clarifies their bewilderment by quoting Joel 2:28-32, this morning’s Old Testament lesson. The passage begins, “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit upon *all* people.” God’s gift of the Spirit is not only for the leaders of the church or the spiritually elite; it is for *everyone*. God’s gift of the Spirit is transcends gender, age and social standing. The word of the Lord goes on to say, “your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams. In those days I will pour out my Spirit upon all my servants, men and women alike, and they will prophesy” (Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:17-18). Men and women, young and old, and even slaves will receive the God’s Spirit.

The lesson for our church is that *all of us* are empowered by God’s Spirit for mission. Unfortunately, most of what we experience in church involves a select few speaking. For instance, on a typical Sunday morning, I’m the one who does most of the talking. So, we can’t help but get the impression that pastor is the one who does the work of the church. Yet, in this story from Acts, it wasn’t only Peter speaking, it was *all* the believers who spoke of the great deeds of God to the crowd. So, the pastor can’t and shouldn’t do it alone; we’re all involved. Maybe you feel a bit too old to be involved in church. You may be thinking that you’ve devoted many years to the church, so its time to step back and let the young do their part. Yet, God is pouring out his Spirit upon *all* *people*, and your *old men* will dream dreams (2:17). Maybe you feel that you’re too young and inexperienced to be involved in the church. As you look around you see many older and wiser people who have served Christ much longer and you might wonder if you have anything productive to add. Yet, God is pouring out his Spirit upon *all people,* and your *young men* will see visions. Maybe you have observed certain gender roles within the church and you think certain tasks are for men and certain tasks are for women. For instance in some circles, only men can be the pastors and women can do everything else. Yet, God is pouring his Spirit upon *all people* and your *sons* and your *daughters* will prophesy. Maybe there are other reasons why you’re hesitant to think that God could use you for his mission. Whatever the reason, whether level of education, language, cultural background, social status or disability, remember that God is pouring his Spirit on *all* his people. The word of the Lord from Joel stresses that even social status is no barrier to God’s Spirit - “In those days, I will pour out my Spirit *even on servants*, men and women alike” (2:29).

Young and old, men and women, rich and poor, all Christians are part of the mission of the church. To this end *everyone* is given a voice. Acts 2:4 emphasizes that *everyone* was filled with the Spirit and *everyone* began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them the ability. Maybe you feel a bit like James Earl Jones and you don’t talk because you’re afraid or embarrassed by your stuttering. In all honesty, it is frightening to talk about faith or Jesus because we don’t always know how others will react. Yet, God’s Spirit is challenging us to speak with the voice he has given us.

(iii) *Cross-Cultural Proclamation: Each one heard the message in their native language*

According to Acts 2:4 all the believers were filled with the Spirit and began to speak in other languages. Now, every year we hear this passage and we wonder about this reference to speaking in tongues. If we were Pentecostals we’d be okay because it’s part of our experience. But we’re Baptists and many of us have never encountered this kind of manifestation of the Spirit. I suppose I could get caught in the quagmire of the biblical and theological issue of speaking in tongues and the gifts of the Spirit, but I really think that’s missing the point of the passage. Here in Acts 2 God’s Spirit empowered the Christians to speak in different languages so that his message could be heard by the people represented by these language groups. It was not the case where Christians were speaking in tongues and an interpretation was needed (1 Corinthians 14:1-25). Instead, the pious Jews from every nation under heaven readily understood the various languages that were being spoken (2:5-6). In this instance, the goal of the gift of tongues was the proclamation of the Christian message. Thus, the purpose was evangelism, so that each person could hear about God’s work in his or her own language. New Testament scholar Darrell Bock expresses this idea nicely; “God is bringing the message of the gospel home to those who hear it” (Bock, *Acts,* p. 102).

At this point, I could reflect on the excellent work of the Canadian Bible Society in translating the Bible into different languages so that the gospel can be heard by all nations under heaven. But I want to bring this passage a little closer to home. Each one of those devout Jews heard the message in his or her own native language. In the same way the Spirit enables us to learn and to speak *native* *language* of our world. The good news about what God has done in and through Jesus remains the same, but we need to learn how to communicate that message to a culture that is changing all the time. This requires us to understand both our message and our community. To be perfectly honest, I look at the neighbourhood around the church and I see lots of opportunity, as well as tons of challenge. How in the world are we to communicate to this neighbourhood? What’s the native language of the people that we encounter on a daily basis? May God’s Spirit empower all of us to know how to communicate the message of God’s love to the people around us.

**3. Conclusion: Come, Holy Spirit**

So, we have come to the conclusion of our journey through some of the key New Testament passages on the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the best way is to end our reflections on the Spirit is with a prayer from the ninth century, originally in Latin, but translated into English. This prayer was sung at Pentecost, ordinations and the opening of church councils (Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts,* p. 50).

Come, Holy Ghost, Creator blest, *Veni, Creator Spiritus,*

Vouchsafe with our souls to rest, *mentes tuorum visita,*

Come with the power and heavenly aid, *imple superna gratia*

And fill the hearts which thou hast made. *qua tu creasti, pectora*