

The Long Range Work of the Holy Spirit

Day of Pentecost; Series A

Acts 2:1-21

“And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.”

Acts 2:8-11

A few weeks ago the barrage of San Diego county fires gave us all a scare, didn't they? The intense heat combined with the incredibly dry conditions and stronger than normal winds was the right recipe for the surrounding landscape to go up in flames with even the smallest, most insignificant external cause—a spark or a cigarette butt. These dangerous fire conditions led to all kinds of concern, even paranoia. Suddenly, yard work that was scheduled for a month later was pushed up on the calendar in order to reduce the risk of a flare up. Suddenly people became more interested in the condition of the yard at their neighbor's house next door. All of this points to at least one reality of which everyone in San Diego County was keenly aware: *No one was out of the range of a life-threatening, property-damaging fire. The potential for a fire had a really long range.*

Our first reading from the Book of Acts describes the events of the Day of Pentecost, the day that our Lord poured his Holy Spirit upon all people. We know from Scripture that the events of the first Pentecost took place fifty days after Jesus rose from the dead. Hence the name “Pentecost,” meaning “fifty.” This is why we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost every year on the fiftieth day after Easter Sunday. Some call the Day of Pentecost the birthday of the Church since the outpouring of God's Spirit gathered believers together into communities of Christian faith. Others call the Day of Pentecost “Babel reversed” since during the building of the tower of Babel the Lord confused the people that were rebelling against him by creating all different languages. Now the Lord gathers the people together through his Spirit in unity by removing the language barrier and making it possible for the Gospel to be spread quite quickly to all people groups and parts of the world. For our purpose this morning I would like us to think of the Day of Pentecost as the day when we learn that *no one is out of the range of the Holy Spirit's work. The work of God to bring salvation to all mankind through his Spirit has long-range, far-reaching potential.*

In order to help us see the truth of this claim, I want us to focus on just a few verses from this incredible description of the first Pentecost. To set the scene, we read that on the day when Pentecost arrived, the apostles were all together in one place within the city of Jerusalem. This is the very area where Jesus ended his Ministry with his sacrifice for Sin, rose to new, eternal life, and then ascended to his Father in heaven to guarantee our place at the right hand of God in the new heavens and the new earth. Here in the city of Jerusalem as the apostles were gathered together, God poured out his Holy Spirit just as he promised he would do (Acts 2:2-4). And then we read that there happened to be dwelling in Jerusalem “devout men from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5) and that “each one was hearing them speak in his own language” (Acts 2:6). To make his point that “men from every nation” were present St. Luke gives us the list: “Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and

Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:8-11). A quick glance at a map to check out these nations and people groups reveals that these are all the nations and people groups surrounding Jerusalem and the people of Judea. God’s work through the Holy Spirit encompasses all people. As the Prophet Joel reminds us, the Lord will “pour out his Spirit on all flesh” (Acts 2:17; Joel 2:28). *No one is out of the range of the Holy Spirit’s work. The work of God to bring salvation to all mankind through his Spirit has long-range, far-reaching potential.*

We know people who think that they are out of the range of the Holy Spirit’s work, though, don’t we? We know people who will tell us sarcastically, “God’s got his work cut out for him if he is going to change me.” We know people who think that God simply won’t accept them until they “clean up their act.” There are people who think that the Church and her members won’t accept them unless they look, act, and dress a certain way. There are people who think that the things they have done, said, and thought cannot and will never be forgiven.

I recall meeting a person who thought that he could never be forgiven. In fact, he said that he didn’t want God to forgive him. I met this person on the streets of Cambridge, England when I was studying overseas for a study abroad program. This man asked me for some food so the two of us went to a nearby food truck for a bite to eat. We struck up a conversation in which he found out I was a theology student. He then told me about his relationship with his mother. He claimed that he caused his mother to commit suicide and that he could never be forgiven for that. In fact, he said he did not want to be forgiven for that. He was somebody that had tried to put himself out of the range of the Holy Spirit’s work.

There are other people we know who try to put themselves out of the range of the Holy Spirit’s work because of a bad childhood experience with the Church. They vow never to step foot in a Church again or pick up a Bible again. There are people who try to put themselves out of the range of the Holy Spirit’s work through skepticism, thinking that the Bible and the message of the good news of salvation in Christ is too far-fetched.

Are there times that you and I, maybe even on a daily basis, might neglect to receive the Holy Spirit’s work by refusing opportunities to gather together as families in Spirit-filled prayer or to read Spirit-filled devotions or study God’s Spirit-filled word? Are there times when we show people not our Spirit-filled self but instead our fleshly-self when we give into laziness, sloth, thoughts of envy, fits of covetousness, temptations to gossip about others and talk about them behind their backs? And then later on the guilt of what we had said and done and thought weighs heavily upon us and we let it bear us down, consuming our thoughts in anxiousness and worry, further affecting our actions towards others. We fail to let God work in us through Spirit-filled confession and absolution. We fail to let the Spirit-filled message of the Gospel fill our hearts and minds through the Spirit-filled forgiveness of God in Christ that renews our hearts and minds. Even we may act at times like we are out of the range of the work of God’s Spirit.

In our Lord’s final moments on the cross he uttered a Spirit-filled cry, “Into your hands I commit my Spirit” (Lk 23:46). The one who was baptized in the Holy Spirit and on whom the Spirit of God rested gave up his Spirit to the Heavenly Father. The one who took every sin, every jealous thought, every hateful word, every lustful intention, every word and

thought of gossip upon himself. He put it to death on the cross then gave up his Spirit of love and forgiveness to God, the Father.

Three days later we learn about this forgiving Spirit of God in Christ. We learn that Jesus' disciples were locked behind doors, huddled in a dark room and then Jesus came and breathed his Spirit upon them and said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld" (Jn 20:21-23).

Now, fifty days later on the day of Pentecost this Christ who has accomplished all of salvation through his body and soul and through the Holy Spirit now pours this Spirit of forgiveness, life, and salvation upon all people—Parthians, Judeans, Egyptians, Americans, you, and me. Now we can know for certain that "there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death" (Rom 8:1-2). The Spirit of God dwells in you (Rom 8:9)! You are not and will never be out of the range of the Holy Spirit's work of salvation in Christ! Nothing is able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus your Lord (Rom 8:39).

Now the Spirit wants to continue to work through you. The Day of Pentecost marked the beginning of the formation of Spirit-filled communities of faith like Atonement Lutheran Church. Now people gather around the Spirit-filled Word of God and the Sacraments to be forgiven, empowered, and enabled through the Spirit to continue the mighty works of God that were displayed on that first Pentecost Day. God has work for you to do through your gifts and talents, your time and treasures. God the Father has work to do in his Spirit through us as we join together, pooling our gifts and talents, our time and treasures as a congregation. As we give a portion of what the Lord has given to us when he first poured out his Spirit upon us, let us continue to rejoice and gather together to partake in the gifts of his Spirit-filled forgiveness, life, and salvation in the Holy Word and Sacraments. It was intentional that the Holy Spirit made itself known on that first Pentecost Day through tongues of fire. Perhaps it is because the potential for fire has a really long range! In more ways than one, we know something about that. Amen.