

RECEIVING THE HOLY SPIRIT

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Central United Methodist Church

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(Acts 8:14-17 NRSV) Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. {15} The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit {16} (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). {17} Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

I AM BAPTIZED

Let us pray:

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful
And kindle in us the fire of your love.
Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created
And you shall renew the face of the earth.
O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit
Did instruct the hearts of the faithful,
Grant that be the same Holy Spirit
We may be truly wise and ever enjoy his consolations
Amen.

As people of God and followers of Jesus Christ, we believe in the Holy Spirit. We Baptize in the name of The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit. Like many of you, I was baptized as an infant at Oak Ridge Methodist Church. I don't remember the day. I can't even recall much about the first few years of my life as a preacher's kid living in a parsonage next to the church. The first big event that comes to mind is riding my pedal car (recently restored by Blaine Moon) down the basement steps. Maybe that explains something about my personality.

I know that I was carried to church as an infant in my mother's arms. This was the beginning of a long dance with God's chosen institution for facilitating His kingdom work on earth. I could probably count on my

two hands the number of weeks in my almost 51 years that I have not been involved in church. Even during the summers as a youth counselor at Camp Tekoa, I was doing church work. In college I sang in various church choirs. Church, youth groups, choirs, worship services, mission work and service formed me into the person I am today. Church is part of my DNA. I'm not sure what kind of person I would be without the church. I can say with confidence that the Holy Spirit has been a part of the journey and I'm sure will continue to be in the years to come.

On Pentecost day, 3,000 people were directly affected by the presence of the Holy Spirit. They were the beginning of the church but unfortunately, as we are told in the first verse of Chapter 8 of the book of Acts, persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. In the other words, the 3,000 quickly came under attack and immediately began to scatter. They packed their bags and caught the first greyhound bus out of town.

What started out as a church of several thousand quickly disintegrated to just a few, namely the Apostles. The excitement and spirit of the new church was dispersed liked leaves gathered up in a strong wind and swept across the horizon. In all of this, God seemed to know what he was doing. The Holy Spirit wasn't confined to Jerusalem but went with those first Christians caught up in the scattering. It was the beginning of a movement that would spread across the Middle East and eventually the world.

Some of you may remember the Mercedes Benz TV commercial from a few years ago that showed a car colliding with a cement wall during a safety test. In the commercial, someone asks the company spokesman why they don't enforce their patent on the Mercedes Benz energy-absorbing car body, a design eventually copied most of the car companies in the world. The Mercedes Benz spokesperson replies matter-of-factly, ***“Because some things in life are too important not to share.”***

The Holy Spirit was a gift that could not be confined to Jerusalem, more importantly, it was too important not to share. It needed to be released to the world.

COME HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit is God with us. It is God with us when we know it and when we can't imagine it. God is always with us. When we feel it and when we can't fathom it, God is with us. The Psalmist says it best in my favorite Psalm:

{7} Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? {8} If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. {9} If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, {10} even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.¹

Will Campbell, best known for his character "**Will B. Dunn**" in the **Kudzu** comic strip, is a Baptist minister and civil rights champion. His comments and actions have angered both the left and right politically. In the 60's Campbell found himself hated by most churches who were determined to keep African-Americans out of their churches as well as out of their schools.

Campbell became friends with P.D. East, an agnostic newspaper editor who couldn't understand Will's commitment to Christianity. Driving down a rural road one day, P.D. said to Will, "**You insist on being Christian. Tell me in ten words or less what that means.**" Without looking up Will responded, "**We are all bastards, but God loves us anyway.**" Things got deathly quiet. Will didn't know that P.D. was an illegitimate child and had been called the ugly word many times as a kid.

¹Psalm 139:7-10, NRSV.

After a long silence P.D. said, *“You got two more wards; you want to try again?”*

Will’s point is correct. It doesn’t matter what your earthly family is like God is always willing to be your father, Jesus Christ is always your brother, and the Holy Spirit is your mother. We belong to the family God. There are no orphans here and nothing can ever separate us from the Love of God in Jesus Christ and as shared by the very presence of the Holy Spirit.

BREATHE INTO US THE BREATH OF LIFE

It is the Holy Spirit that breathes the breath of life into us—the life that really matters. The Psalmist reminds us: *When God hides his face creation is terrified, when God takes away their breath they die.*²

Have you ever had the wind knocked out of you? If you have, you know it is not a good feeling. Having your wind knocked out is not just a physical; it can also be something that knocks you off balance emotionally and spiritually. An unexpected diagnosis, the loss of a relationship, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, there are so many things that can knock the wind right out of us.

Nicodemus came to Jesus one night. He was out of breath. He was the leader of the Jews but wanted to discuss the meaning of life with Jesus. Instead of giving him a new rule and more work, Jesus asked him to listen to the spirit and be born again. Like Nicodemus we are worn out with all the rules and trying to be what the world wants us to be instead of what we were created to be. We need to stop trying to control everything around us and allow the wind to blow. We need to try being instead of doing.

Job knew what it was like to have the breath knocked out of him. In one sweeping disaster, he lost his farm, his family, his assets, his

²Psalm 104:29, NRSV.

accumulations. Lying naked in the dirt, he asks God the riddle of suffering. He fails to get an answer but responds with an affirmation, *“The spirit of God has made me, the breath of the almighty gives me life.”*³

Whatever your source of breathlessness might be, there is a simple prayer for you and me. *“Breathe on me, breath of God, fill me with life anew. Breathe on me, breath of God, make me more like you.”*⁴

What good news! The same Spirit that turned chaos into creation that breathed into us the breath of life, that same Spirit can move over our being and make us new again.

TRANSFORM US

The Spirit has the power to transform. Wayne Cordiero in his book, *Culture Shift: Transforming Your Church from the Inside Out*, Tells this story:

Years ago, I pastored a church in Hilo, the easternmost city on the island of Hawaii. Six months into the ministry, we held a church wide picnic. I was having a great time until a man with a condescending tone struck up a conversation. “Do you know what kind of people you have in this church?” he said.

“Nice ones?” I replied with a smile.

He didn’t laugh. In fact, he grimaced. Then he growled, “They’re sick,” he said. “I’ve been here a long time and I know them.”

He began to give me a verbal tour through the congregation. He first pointed to a teenager. “That girl was raised by a mentally retarded

³Job 33:4, NRSV.

⁴*The United Methodist Hymnal*, (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 420.

grandmother because her own mother abandoned her,” he said. “She does strange things.”

Then he pointed out a young man. “That guy is on crack,” he said, “and that one is on probation. He has to go back to jail each weekend. Better watch him.”

Pointing to another cluster of people he said, “That couple is living together, and that guy has a bad swindling problem. He can tap the church coffers, and you’ll never know it.”

After offering a similar commentary on other members, he looked at me and sighed, “They’re sick here! Your church is full of sickies!” he said. Then he walked off.

I was speechless. I had thought they were wonderful people! But after his eye-opening narration, I started looking at them through other eyes. “That girl *does* act a bit strange at times,” I observed. I also began to wonder about the guy standing ear her, the one on probation. “His eyes *are* shifty,” I thought. Frustrated with my new findings, I argued with God. “You gave me a bunch of sickies!” I protested. “They’re all sick!”

When I finally stopped whining and started listening. God corrected me. It was if he said to my heart, “I didn’t come for well people, but for those who are ailing.” I remembered what Jesus said: “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17).

The Lord seemed to quietly continue: “So don’t you be ashamed of them! I need them to be restored, and if you can’t restore them in a congregation called New Hope Christian Fellowship, I need to find another nursery. I’m calling you to love them because I love them.”

God seemed to have more say. “And I’m not ashamed of you, Wayne Cordeiro—you’re a sickie too!”

God nailed me. I realized that we're all wounded. I have two choices. I can view people as a bunch of losers, destined always to remain that way. Or I can bring them into God embrace and they'll be healed, allowing God's power to be "perfected in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).⁵

The Holy Spirit helps the church to be a hospital where sinners—needy people—get well, are transformed and made whole again. The best thing that could happen today is for the Lord to send His Spirit into this place.

*O that he would breathe into our dead bodies—the breath of life.
O that he would fill sad hearts with the joy of his salvation.
Come, Holy Spirit, come. Blow like the wind, burn like the fire,
convict, consecrate, cleanse until our hearts are pure and our
wills are thine.*

MAKE US LIKE JESUS

The Holy Spirit comes and makes us more like Jesus. When E. Stanley Jones went to India as a missionary, he sought an audience with Gandhi. Jones asked him if he had any counsel for him as he began his missionary work among the people. Gandhi replied, "*Be like Jesus.*"

Someone once said that spiritual renewal is like remodeling your house. It takes longer than you hoped and cost more than you planned because it was in a bigger mess than you ever thought possible. This may be true. But God is in the renovation business. He can restore our souls and make us whole again.

Lloyd Ogilvie—long time pastor of Hollywood Presbyterian Church and former chaplain of the US Senate writes: "*For over thirty years my*

⁵(Wayne Cordeiro, *Culture Shift: Transforming Your Church From the Inside Out* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 25-26.)

ministry has been focused on helping religious church members experience spiritual renewal. People experience renewal differently, but it usually begins when the areas of our lives that have been uncommitted to the Lord are brought to him in full surrender.”⁶

Just let the Holy Spirit come take control. Come, Holy Spirit, come!

⁶Source Unknown.