

The 'Balloon-Powered' Church

Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Today we celebrate! On Pentecost Sunday we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit – God's gracious, loving, and guiding presence *with us* and *within us*. We celebrate the beginnings of the life of the Christian Church. And we celebrate the blessings of being part of this particular community of faith.

Most of you are somewhat familiar with the story of Pentecost as recorded in the book of Acts, which by the way, was written by the gospel writer Luke. It's a remarkably bizarre story filled with special effects of colorful sights and sounds. Like a loud rushing wind, tongues of fire, speaking in foreign languages, and being able to hear and understand in one's own native language. These represent the gift to speak out and the gift to listen.

This story, written at least 40-50 years after Jesus' death, answers the question: **When, where, why and how did the Christian Church begin?** Jesus, their prophet, teacher and spiritual leader, had been executed by an occupying foreign empire. Under normal circumstances, any movement would have simply faded away after losing such a leader.

The miracle of Easter reveals, in part, that this group of Jesus' followers was able to experience the ongoing presence of Jesus with them. However, since Jesus' death they were still basically just a powerless, fearful handful of followers – until the day of Pentecost.

This story also reveals that the Spirit of the God of love, the Spirit of the living Christ functions, in essence, to create and empower a new and dynamic community. That was the case 2000 years ago, this is still the case today! True and authentic community, from a biblical standpoint, is first and foremost a gift of God through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes it's good to remind ourselves of that. **Genuine community, including ours here at College Hill, is ultimately built not just on mutual compatibility, shared affection, or even common interests and beliefs. True community is built on nothing less than the power of God within and among us.**

The Pentecost story goes on to reveal that the community of faith that is fashioned by the God-within us, the Holy Spirit, is not created simply for the well-being of its own members. **A biblical understanding of the role of the church, therefore, instructs us that our particular community of faith does not exist solely for our own personal well-being.** The coming of the Holy Spirit on that first day of Pentecost, and ever since, is **for the empowerment of the community to be sent out into the world so that all people can hear and share in the Good News of God's grace, mercy, forgiveness, love, and the power to transform lives.** We have a term for this sharing of good news: **evangelism.** For years now we've been trying to **re-claim that word and rescue it from being associated**

only with evangelicalism, which is simply one particular style, expression and theological perspective within the larger Christian faith.

We also see evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit working within and among us when we are able to look beyond our own varied differences (and even disagreements) and band together in common ministry and mission and purpose. In other words, being **empowered to seek unity in the midst of our diversity**. You've heard that phrase many times before, but this is what it means, in part, to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

To help make this point about how the church is filled with the Holy Spirit, I'd like to repeat an illustration that I shared with you six years ago on Pentecost Sunday. Since we have a lot of new folks since then, I thought I'd repeat it because it makes the point so well. This analogy compares the work of the Holy Spirit within the community of faith with a balloon filled with air. (I know some of you have been wondering when I'd get to the balloon part of this sermon, that I've entitled "The 'Balloon-Powered' Church".)

At this time, please take the balloon that you were given at the beginning of this service and simply hold it in your hand. Your balloon, at this point, is not full of air. It is a lifeless balloon. It continues to just lie wherever you put it. It doesn't move. It has no power. The balloon is not doing what it was created to do.

But take that balloon now and do what the Holy Spirit did to those disciples at Pentecost – fill it with power. (That means blow up your balloon, or have a neighbor do it for you.) Then hold onto it without tying it off. What has happened? It's now full of air. It is still basically lifeless, however. It goes nowhere until that power is released.

The point is this: **God did not fill those first disciples with the power of the Holy Spirit so that they could just stay behind locked doors cowering in fear. They, and the church today, are given the power of God's Spirit to move out into the world in order to make a difference.**

I want everyone, now, to hold up your balloon and on the count of three, to release it – 1, 2, 3... [balloons flying all around the sanctuary accompanied by lots of laughter]. That was fun!

With the release of the air's power, the balloon is free to move. It goes out. When the wind power within the balloon is released, however, we don't know exactly where the balloon is going to go, but we know it's going somewhere. When the power of the Holy Spirit is released in our lives and in this congregation – meaning to allow the presence of God within us focus and direct our lives – we may not always know where we're going to go at first either. We just need to trust that it's wherever the Spirit wants us to go. The question is: **Do we have the courage to go where we discern the Holy Spirit is leading us? And do what we discern the Holy Spirit is calling us to do?**

What has happened to our balloons, now, however? They are depleted of their air, their wind power. They are again lifeless until they are filled anew with air and re-released. **Just as a balloon needs to go back to its source of energy and power to recharge, so do we – and that means connecting with what you perceive to be the Divine. That is the purpose of any meaningful spirituality – connecting you with the loving presence of God in your life, and our life together as a community of faith.**

Even though the Spirit of God is always with us and always within us (that's the promise of our Baptism), **do we not need to experience a sense of being re-filled, re-energized and renewed by God's Spirit from time to time?** Hopefully, that is what happens every time we worship and share communion, study and fellowship and pray together, and serve others. And for many of us, connecting with the Divine can also

happen through music, or a bonding with the beauty of nature, or even at times in our common daily routines. For me, yard work is often a spiritual experience.

There's one final analogy I'd like to make. What happens to a balloon that is filled with air after several days? Over time, the air slowly leaks out – the power leaves. The balloon, without doing anything, will go flat. The same is true with muscles. Muscles that aren't used lose their strength through atrophy and inactivity. I wonder, can the same thing happen with our faith, or our sense of being connected to God?

The power that God gives you and me and the church (especially working through how we spend our time, develop and share our talents, and use the blessings of our many resources) is expected to be shared and used for the common good of all. God calls us to be good stewards, and to use wisely all that God has blessed us with – in other words, to **expend that never-ending source of energy and power, only to repeat the cycle again and again: refill-expend; refill-expend...**

It is my hope and prayer that you and I, and us together as a community of faith, will be filled and re-filled (like a balloon) with the empowering presence of God through the Holy Spirit to go where the Spirit directs us, and do as Christ guides us – and always as a diverse yet mystically unified community of faith.

That's the gift of Pentecost!

Amen.