

# Stewardship and the Spirit

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**Ezekiel 37:1-14 and Acts 2:1-21**

I need a better word, a truer word, for a day like today – the Day of Pentecost – 50 days after Easter, when the Holy Spirit comes and the church is called into being. A better word than “paradox,” because I both LOVE Pentecost and am terrified of it; I am both grateful for the coming of the Holy Spirit and am confounded by it.

We Presbyterians, perhaps we predominantly white mainline Protestants, don’t quite know what to do with Pentecost. My apologies if I have told this joke too recently, but it’s one of the few church jokes I know.

*“A woman walked into a church on a Sunday morning, a first-time visitor. She was welcomed and given a bulletin and seated. Things were proceeding well enough. The time for the sermon arrived, and the preacher started preaching. At a notable point in the sermon, the woman let out an ‘Amen,’ audible to those worshiping near her. It happened again, this time a little louder. ‘That’s right,’ she would say aloud, or ‘preach it.’ The people around her, not used to such a thing, squirmed a bit in their pews.*

*All of this continued, until finally, with a concerned look, an usher came to her, politely, and inquired if she was all right. Assured that she was fine, the usher returned to his post. It continued, and finally, the usher returned. ‘Ma’am, are you sure you’re all right,’ he asked. She paused. ‘Oh yes, I’m fine, I’m fine,’ she replied. ‘I’ve got the Spirit.’ ‘Well, ma’am, that may be,’ the usher said, ‘but you didn’t get it here.’”*

Is that us? That’s the paradox, or more. We need to be able to say “we got it here,” but we’re not sure what “it” is, let alone whether we want “it” or not.

In that spirit, here are three important insights from Pentecost, three ways why the coming of the Holy Spirit matters, now, to you, to us, and, and why we want “it,” even when we’re terrified of and confounded by it, and how Pentecost and stewardship are inextricably linked.

1. You are gifted – without exception. The immediate gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost was the capacity to hear and understand what people were saying in other languages. It would be as if I, never having had a lesson in Russian or Korean, ever, could understand

these languages fully. That's one gift. But Peter – in that moment – insists there are other gifts. Young people prophesying, elders dreaming. Wisdom, that feels like to me. Scripture lifts up other gifts of the Spirit. From Romans: teaching, exhorting, giving, leading, diligence, compassion, cheerfulness. From I Corinthians: healing, interpreting. From I Peter: speaking, serving. You can find yourself in one of those gifts, and others. In May and June we recognize those gifts in formal ways, but they are present every day, in everyone. To be a steward of Pentecost, a steward of the Spirit, is to name your gifts and claim your gifts and use them for the common good, *in* the church, *beyond* the church, wherever the Spirit calls and empowers you. Mary Oliver asks what you will do with your one wild and precious life. The affirmation is that the Spirit gives you that life, that gift, abundantly, without exception. Don't let anyone tell you differently – you are gifted.

2. Because we are all given gifts, the church can be transformed. Every week, every day, a steady stream of articles comes to my inbox about how the church is not only declining, but dying. I do not believe it. Yes, congregations, individual congregations, will close. And yes, denominations are shrinking. And yes, we should be concerned. But no, we should not panic. And no, we should not be reactive. And no, we should not blame what is beyond our control. But yes, we should be thoughtful. And yes, we should be bold. And yes, places like Third Church, with financial and human and physical resources in abundance, must think about the future with innovation and hope or we will die, and deservedly so. But look around. Think about all of those gifts we have been given.

And hear again the Spirit's Pentecostal dream for us, from the prophet Ezekiel. A valley of dead, dry bones, which can mean so many things but is often a symbol of the church these days. "Can these bones live?" God asks the prophet, asks us. Can these bones live? And God gives the bones breath, and skin, and muscle, and life. And more than that, the Spirit gives the bones *hope*. Hope. "O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live..." You shall live.

I believe that there is a future for the church, and that there is certainly a strong future for *this* church. But note that our collaboration with the Spirit is not a passive thing. We must take all the gifts we've been given and imagine new life. If our future is about preserving our past, we are in trouble. If our future is about doing things the way we've always done them, we are in trouble. If we are open to the Spirit, we will have a future. If we trust the Spirit, we will have a future. If we are less concerned about whether we have a future and more concerned about how we will use our gifts to meet the needs of

a broken and fearful world, our future will be filled with Pentecostal hope. Dry bones can stay dead. Or they can live.

3. So if all are given gifts, without exception (point 1), and if there is a future for the church as we are faithful stewards of those gifts (point 2), what will that future look like? First, I need to say what it will *not* look like. Pentecost is the great equalizer. Because the Spirit gives us *all* gifts without exception, the future will not look like:

- Calling the police because black customers are hanging out at a Starbucks.
- Calling campus police because a black student is taking a nap in a dorm lounge.
- Calling campus police because two Native American young men are making a white person “nervous” on a campus tour.
- Calling the police because people are speaking Spanish at a restaurant
- Calling a human being an “animal” or any other de-humanizing term.

This reflects a pre-Pentecost, even anti-Pentecost, perspective, where perceived difference fosters disunity and division. A Pentecostal church awash in the gifts of the Spirit will not look like that, nor will it stand for that in the culture. True diversity is a gift of the Spirit, and leads always to a profound unity.

My friend Jill Duffield, the editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook*, writes that “An inbreaking of the Holy Spirit means a great equalizing has happened... Men and women, young and old, slave and free - the Spirit pours over all...Everyone is on a level playing field when it comes to the power and outpouring of the Holy Spirit...The old human categories no longer apply to the new community formed through Jesus Christ and ushered in by the Holy Spirit...Pentecost is revolutionary because the wind blows down barriers and the flames burn down walls between peoples separated by geography, culture, language, nation, class, race and every other human-created category...”

Jill concludes: “Pentecost is revolutionary, turning upside down and inside out every human-constructed category, divide and barrier to God's constituting one family. Nothing will separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord, and through the gift of the Holy Spirit, nothing will separate us from one another, either.”

That is what a Pentecostal church awash in the gifts of the Spirit will look like. A church in love. A church of love. A church sharing that love with the world, and calling out injustice whenever and wherever it encounters it.

I am sure I will be the only preacher quoting Bishop Michael Curry this morning, including his words on the redemptive power of love. *The redemptive power of love*. If Jesus came as love incarnate, I thought as he was preaching in Windsor Chapel yesterday morning, then Pentecost gives us all the power to share that love, to join the movement that the dry bones of the church must embrace if it is to love, a movement, Bishop Curry preached, “grounded in the unconditional love of God for the world. And a movement mandating people to live and love and in so doing, to change not only their lives but the very life of the world itself.”

That’s what happens today, on Pentecost, because of the Spirit. That’s what we “get,” if we are open to it, if we embrace our calling to be stewards of the gifts the Spirit gives to us.

Nancy Rockwell writes: “This is the promise of Pentecost: now we no longer depend solely on Jesus to be the one who understands. Now we, too, understand. And now we, too, can speak and our voices can spread the Spirit of understanding.” Spread the Spirit of justice. Spread the Spirit of love. Because we are gifted. And empowered.

Great Spirit, come and rest in me, and then make me, make us, restless, for the healing of souls, for the transformation of the church, for the restoration of the world. Amen.