



**Tony Acompanado, Director of Faith Formation**  
**Acts 2:1-21**

**Ascension Lutheran Church**  
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### **Reflection: Pentecost**

Today we gather to celebrate Pentecost! And I wonder what each of you would say if I asked you what Pentecost means? I also wonder how you'd react if I told you that I think we generally misinterpret Pentecost? And actually, not just misinterpret it a little, but for the most part we get Pentecost completely backwards. Intrigued? Offended? Stay with me.

I suspect that we've heard the story of the wind and the tongues-of-fire and the crowds-hearing-the-sermon-in-their-own-languages just enough to believe that the promise of Pentecost is about deliverance, celebration, victory, and strength. After all, the signs of Pentecost are mighty. And what is this gift of the Holy Spirit, if not God's own agent – the very Spirit of the resurrected Jesus, sent to dwell in us and accompany us guiding us into truth.

The name Holy Spirit comes from the Biblical Greek word *parakletos* or Paraclete in English, which means, “to come alongside another.” In this sense, the Paraclete can be an advocate, to come along side to defend and counsel – or comforter, to come along side to provide comfort and encouragement. But the one who comes along side might also do so to strengthen us for work, or to awaken our courage, or to prompt or even provoke us to action.

The gift of God's Spirit indicates that something new in human history has begun, that times have changed. The Spirit has come to mark the church and every member of it as belonging to God and as God's agent in the world. The foreign languages in today's scripture reading are not an instance of trickery or mass hysteria. God is at work here, equipping people to communicate to the rest of the world about God.

We celebrate Pentecost as the first event in the life of the church. And while it may have started indoors, it quickly moved outdoors. If we take this as a metaphor for today's church, then we can't help but see the beauty of it. The spirit gives the gathered community the courage and gifts to be the scattered community. The church is given the ability to speak in diverse ways people can understand.

However, there was nothing particularly comforting about it – the rush of a violent wind and descending tongues of fire. Once the disciples take their new multi-lingual ability into the streets of Jerusalem, pretty much everyone who witnesses their activity is described as being “bewildered,” “amazed” and “astonished.” The Spirit didn't comfort anyone, but instead prompted the disciples to make an extremely public scene with the troubling good news that the person the crowds had put to death was alive through the power of God.

But let me be clear, if we dare to take seriously the word and work of the Holy Spirit, then we can be confident that we will inevitably be pushed beyond what we expect or imagine. Sometimes I think we tend to think of the Holy Spirit as the answer to a problem – but what if the Spirit's work is to create for us a new problem – that we have a story to tell, mercy to share, and love to spread?

As far as I can tell, nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus command us to go out and build churches, take care of old buildings, and devote ourselves to crumbling institutions. No, Jesus says, “go and make disciples” and “when you care for the least of these you are caring for me” – and “love one another as I have loved you.” This kind of work is inherently disruptive, difficult, and at times even dangerous. So, Jesus sends the Paraclete, the one who comes along side us to encourage, equip, strengthen, provoke and, yes, at times to comfort us so that we can get out there and do it all again.

And precisely because the promised Holy Spirit is the very presence of the crucified and resurrected Christ, we shouldn't expect things to always be easy. In the cross of Christ, we see God's strength mediated through

suffering, God's victory achieved through defeat, and new life promised and provided through death. The crucified and resurrected God we meet in Jesus is a God of paradox- so why then would we dare to think that we should look for anything less in God's Holy Spirit. For this reason, I want to offer what I think are two paradoxes of Pentecost.

The first paradox – the Holy Spirit doesn't come to solve our problems, but rather to create them. Think about this for a moment – absent the coming of the Holy Spirit, the disciples could go back to their previous careers as fishermen. I can almost imagine hearing James and John explaining, "Sure, it was a wild and crazy three-year-ride, and that Jesus was one a heck of a guy, but maybe we needed to get that out of our system before we could settle down and take over the family business."

Once the Spirit comes, however, that return to normalcy is no longer an option. They'll now be propelled throughout the ancient world to proclaim the unlikely message that God has redeemed the world through a travelling preacher from the backwaters of Palestine who was executed for treason and blasphemy. Notice that the Holy Spirit doesn't solve the disciples' problems, it creates them.

A few years ago, New York Times columnist David Brooks challenged new college graduates to give up the American obsession with self-fulfillment and instead find themselves in service to others by making and keeping what he described as sacred commitments and by rising to the challenges they discover all around and outside of them. "Most successful young people," he writes, "don't look inside and then plan a life. They look outside and find a problem, which summons their life.... Most people don't form a self and then lead a life. They're called by a problem, and the self is constructed gradually by their calling."

I believe that the same is true of a community. A congregation won't truly discover itself until they're willing to give themselves away. No amount of time spent on developing new mission statements or devising new member campaigns can substitute for good old fashioned looking around one's neighborhood and asking, "Who needs us?" and "What can we do with our resources to bear God's love to those around us?"

Now on to the second paradox. The Holy Spirit doesn't prevent failure, but rather invites it. Or, to put it a little differently, the Holy Spirit invites us to find fulfillment and victory in and through our setbacks and failures.

There's a popular phrase, "failure is not an option." And while we may find this quote to be motivational across many areas of life, I think it's this kind of mindset that's paralyzing many of our churches today. Failure is not only an option, it's inevitable. The problems this world and congregations face are too great, too complex, and too significant to imagine that we'll land on the best solution the first time out...or even the second, or maybe ever. Once we've identified a worthy challenge, we must experiment...and count on failing, innovate...and count on failing, invent...and count on failing again.

A middle school English teacher friend of mine once told me, "I tell my kids to make a mistake every day -- just not the same mistake!" Each mistake – each set back – each false start – each failure is not meant to be dwelled on and grieved over, but rather to be learned from.

But so too, living in a success-obsessed world can lead us to forget this – ultimately, it's neither about us nor up to us. God is the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of this universe, and only God can bring the kind of redemption we long for and need. Our job is to partner with God's work wherever we can recognize it. If the cross teaches us nothing else, it teaches that success will not always look like success, and victory may often come disguised as defeat. The question isn't whether we're successful, but whether or not we're faithful.

When we hold this perspective, it grants us a measure of freedom to throw ourselves into lost causes, to place ourselves on the side of those who are most vulnerable, and to take great risks and dare great endeavors. Why? Because we trust that whatever the immediate results of our efforts may be, both our hopes and our future are secured not by our own abilities, but by God's gracious and unfailing promise. We need to remember that Resurrection, only and always follows crucifixion.

And why should we ever be surprised by that? If we would've read the alternate gospel text today from John, then we would have heard Jesus making an astounding promise to his disciples. Jesus says that even if they have a hard time believing what he says based on his words alone, at least they can believe it because of the works they've seen him do. And then he goes on to say, "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these."

Did you hear that? We who believe in Jesus will do even greater works than he! Feeding, preaching, healing, bringing hope to the hopeless. Maybe the important question isn't, "did you hear that?", but rather, "do you believe it?" But I have to be honest because I'd be lying if I didn't confess that sometimes, I don't. At times it just seems too astounding, too far-fetched, and too much beyond my knowledge or experience to comprehend or believe.

But sometimes, aided by the Advocate that Jesus promises – the same Holy Spirit of God that fell at that first Pentecost, I do see it. I see people throughout this community of faith and around the world continuing the story that started so long ago by sharing their faith, living with confidence, claiming the power of God in their lives, and reaching out in mercy and love to the broken and needy around them. I see them, and in them I see the Church that continues to be created anew by the Spirit. And the thing is, the more I name this, the more I see it...and the easier it gets to name...and then to see.

Perhaps this Pentecost, it's time to shake things up by encouraging us to consider what problems the Holy Spirit is inviting us into this year. What failures do we want to entertain? What great endeavors do we want to risk?

People of God, we have been joined by our Baptism into a community of faith that looks for – and even expects – the Holy Spirit to come along side us and shake things up, preparing and equipping each of us to share the disruptive, surprising, and life-giving word of grace of the God who will not rest until all people enjoy the promise of abundant life.

So as you continue to bear witness to both the promises and the paradoxes of God's surprising, challenging, and renewing Holy Spirit, I wish to remind you that we are not alone – rather, we are accompanied by the One who comes along side us to encourage, equip, and strengthen us to testify to the truth we have in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen!