

## The Gifts of the Spirit

**Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...**

I remember hearing a story many years ago about a little boy whose parents started going to church... not loving the experience himself, the little boy was so bored that he chose to sit in the back of the church with the ushers...

Well, one day the boy noticed a big brass plaque (with a long list of names)... wondering what it was - the boy asked one of the ushers, "*Who are all these people?*"...

The usher looked up admiring the plaque and said, "Son, *those are the names of the men and women who died in the service*"...

The young boy continued looking – and then wondered, "*Did they go to the 9 or the 11 O' clock service?*"

Today, as you know, congregations all around the world celebrate the Day of Pentecost... and if you find the Church to be boring it probably doesn't make much of a difference what day it is – but for the rest of us – today is a day of celebration... a day that we remember the birthday of the Church - when that first group of believers gathered in Jerusalem (50 days after the Passover – which is what Pentecost means – 50<sup>th</sup> day) to celebrate a Jewish festival known as *Shavuot* (a holiday that celebrates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai)...

And as they gathered, it tells us in our reading this morning from Acts (chapter 2) that something very strange happened... in fact, listen to what it says, "*And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting... divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them... and all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability*"...

Now I think you might agree that this is a very strange account... and I say that because even if you did find yourself in a church where the music was so uplifting that you found yourself crying – or the preacher so dynamic that you felt the need to shout '*Amen*' in the middle of the service – (there's a pretty good chance) that even with all of those theatrics (yes, you might have an emotional experience) but more than likely you wouldn't hear the sounds of a violent wind, or see tongues of

fire falling from the sky, (or leave the church, for that matter, knowing how to speak in tongues)...

And yet, I think the issue for some Christians who want to have a 'spiritual experience' (is that, that's what they get focused on) – believing that an experience with the Holy Spirit has to be as dramatic as it was on the Day of Pentecost (like some emotional high that has to save us from the doldrums of daily life – if it's an indeed an act of God)...

In fact, isn't this what we're told by our Pentecostal friends (or even self-proclaimed Born-Again Christians)? – that if you're really saved (in the very least) you should speak in tongues... and I say that because in some churches these *outward expressions of piety* are evidence of one's salvation... evidence that you're saved...

But can I tell you something? – as dramatic as the story of Pentecost is (there is no other account in the New Testament of the Spirit *ever again* blowing through the Church as a violent wind – no other account of tongues of fire appearing before God's people – and the main teachings in Scripture that we have about speaking in tongues (outside the Book of Acts) – comes from Paul's thoughts in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians...

And yes, it is mentioned as a gift (and yes, he does mention it multiple times), but listen to what he says in chapter 14 (verse 18), “*I thank my God that I speak with tongues more than all of you; yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others (the Word of God with clarity), than ten thousand words in tongues*”... in other words, according to St. Paul (although speaking in tongues may have been a gift of the Spirit, for some) it was also considered *the least of the gifts*... and in some ways, it was seen as stumbling block (in that it could very easily offend the intellect of many)...

Now I don't mean to sound self-righteous – and I certainly wouldn't put down the gifts of others – but my point is that for the Holy Spirit to speak to us and touch our lives in a beautiful and wonderful way that is life-changing – as well as authentic - (it doesn't have to be so dramatic or over-the-top)...

In fact, the Bible tells us that as baptized Christians (the Holy Spirit already dwells within each one of us)... but I think the problem for those who are waiting for something earth-shattering to happen – is that many people don't recognize how

voice of the Holy Spirit (is already speaking to them) – the same way the Spirit is speaking to you...

Let me see if I can give you an example... when I returned to my home parish, St. John's Lutheran Church on Long Island (I did so because I wanted to grow in my relationship with the Lord)... Thankfully I had a great pastor – a wonderful church family to call my own – and I had an open heart to God's Word)...

But what I didn't have was a lot of experience with the things of the Spirit... I certainly was never slain in the Spirit (as some of my Evangelical friends spoke about)... I never performed healings – or learned to walk on water – and the closest I ever came to speaking in tongues was 5 years of French (that to this day I continue to butcher)...

But as I look back on that time the Holy Spirit was constantly speaking to me – actually it was more like a whisper - (but I'm so thankful that I listened) because it changed my entire life...

In fact, the Holy Spirit spoke to me the day that the head usher asked me if I would be willing to help out one Sunday (because the scheduled usher didn't show up)... and can I tell you?... I didn't know anything about ushering (all I wanted to do was hide in the pew and sing songs) but because I followed the prompting of the Spirit I ended up knowing everyone in that church... and to this day, they're some of the dearest people I've ever known...

Or the day when my Pastor asked if I would be willing to read the lessons one Sunday... and no, I don't remember jumping at the opportunity (in fact, I was petrified of public speaking) – but by the Grace of God (I decided to ignore my self-doubts and trust in the Spirit)... and looking back - I have to believe that it was my willingness to step out of my comfort zone and at least try (And because of that, I can look back now at the thousands of times the Lord has used me to bring healing, or comfort, or even words of encouragement to so many of God's people through the sermons I've preached)...

Or the day I was asked to teach 5<sup>th</sup> grade Sunday school – or consider seminary – or even the day I consecrated bread and wine at the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem... and no, it wasn't because I had some over-the-top, dramatic moment that knocked me to the ground and made me foam at the mouth (but simply because I was willing to say “yes” when opportunities to serve the Lord arose)... just like the Holy Spirit continues to speak to all of us today... not with the sound of a violent

wind (but more than often in a soft whisper – encouraging you to get out of your pew and try)... even if it's not something you imagined yourself doing...

Do you understand that?... The Holy Spirit already dwells within the heart of every baptized believer (and that certainly includes you) – but if you're waiting for fire to drop from the sky you're also going to miss the many ways that the Spirit does invite you to serve now (and in that way, invites every believer to grow in their faith)... every believer who's willing to follow Jesus...

And that might be in something as simple as being generous when the offering plate is passed (and trusting that you won't go broke when you give back to the Lord), or compassionate to someone who's hurting or who simply needs a listening ear (in fact, I bet you can think of someone right now – who needs that)... it might be that *still small voice* that is encouraging you to “finally grow up and forgive” – or to treat an addiction that's ruining your life – or getting more involved in the church that you belong (when the invitation comes) – even if you think landscaping has nothing to do with serving the Lord...

Or when the Spirit warns you to slow down, don't go back, keep your mouth shut, or when the Spirit encourages you to speak up...

And it's not a matter of whether or not the Holy Spirit will speak to you (it's whether or not you will follow and respond) when it does... do you understand that?... that's how we have encounters with the Holy Spirit (and who knows where that path will lead you) but one thing is certain (it will be the path that God leads)...

Perhaps this is why Jesus says to us in Luke 16:10, “*The one faithful in very little is also faithful in much, and the one unrighteous in very little is also unrighteous in much.*”... or why Jesus says in Matthew 25:21, “*Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few small things; and now I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master!*”...

In other words, to enter into the joy of the Spirit doesn't require bolts of lightning to come down from heaven (but simply a willingness to listen when the Holy Spirit speaks to your own heart) as it does day after day (to you and to me – and to everyone who follows Jesus)... But the question is – will you respond?....

Let me just close by saying remember what I always tell you – the Holy Spirit doesn't call us to become religious nuts... instead, the Spirit calls us all to bear fruit... and Galatians 5:22 tells us what that fruit includes love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control – and on this Day of Pentecost God wants you to have all of these gifts for yourself... which is why Jesus says, “Follow me!”...

May the whisper of God order your steps and make sense of your confusion... may the Spirit be your guide and your light... and may the peace of our Lord and Savior be with you always...

In Jesus’ name we pray...

**Amen!**