

Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire

Sterling UMC
June 12, 2011
Acts 2:1-13

Once upon a time there was a farmer who fell on some hard times. He had gone through several tough years in a row, and his crop production was way down. Consequently, he was having financial problems, so he went to see the manager of his bank.

"I've got some good news and some bad news," he told the banker. "Which would you like to hear first?"

"Let's get the bad news over with first," the banker replied.

"Okay," said the farmer, "what with the bad drought and inflation and all, I won't be able to pay anything on my mortgage this year."

"Well, that's pretty bad," the banker observed.

"Hold on, it gets worse," said the farmer. "I also won't be able to pay anything on the big loan for all the machinery I bought."

"My oh my, things really are bad," the banker exclaimed.

"Well it's worse than that," the farmer continued. "You remember I also borrowed money to buy seed and fertilizer and other supplies. So of course, I can't pay that back, either."

"That's just awful," the banker said, "but tell me quickly. What is the good news?"

"The good news," said the farmer, "is that I fully intend to keep doing business with you!"

Now, there's some valuable theology in that story, if we reverse the subjects. The good news of the gospel is that, in spite of our moral bankruptcy. God keeps on doing business with us. That is one of the greatest promises of the Bible, and in a sense, this is what the Pentecost story in Acts 2 is about.

The disciples were spiritually bankrupt, their minds were confused; their confidence was shaken; their nerves were jangled; their strength was sapped; their energy was depleted; their hearts were empty.

Over the preceding weeks, they had been on an unbelievably emotional roller coaster, with its incredible ups and downs. Just think of it – there was the exhilaration of Palm Sunday quickly followed by the arrest and trial of Jesus.

As if that weren't enough, next came the toughest blow of all. Their hopes were dashed, their dreams destroyed, their spirits crushed by Good Friday and the crucifixion. But then came Easter morning! (Their Lord was resurrected, and their spirits were resurrected too. They were now ready to take on the world.)

But then came another jolt! Jesus told them: "I can't stay with you. I must go to my Father, and I want you to take up this torch. I want you to take up this ministry of love. I want you to do it now! I want you to be the church! I want you to teach the world this message of love and sacrifice and commitment and grace. I want you to be my witnesses to the world."

"But Lord," they protested, "We can't do that! We don't have the strength and power. We don't have the know-how. We don't have the courage."

Don't worry," Jesus promised them, "I won't leave you alone. I will send you a helper. I will send you strength and power. I will send the Holy Spirit to be with you always."

And then Jesus ascended into heaven. And the disciples (per his instructions) waited for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Like little children, they went back to the security of the upper room to think all this through, to sort it all out, and to wait for the Holy Spirit. Now, picture this in your mind. Their Lord was gone. The task is squarely on their shoulders. They feel inadequate and frightened. And now they must sit and wait for this Holy Spirit to come.

We know they were never very good at waiting. On earlier occasions when Jesus told them to wait, they either, in their impatience, did the wrong thing, or in their apathy, fell asleep. Now, here they are, waiting again.

I can just imagine their impatience and uncertainty as they sat huddled together in that upper room waiting.

Until suddenly they heard something – a strange sound, away off in the distance, becoming louder and louder as it moved toward them, a sound like a mighty rushing wind – and it blew on that place! Oh my, did it blow on that place! And then just as miraculously they saw something - there appeared what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. Their hearts were set ablaze with the power and presence of the Christ, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. They began to speak in other languages.

And they received courage and strength and new life. Through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, they became the church of the living God on that day of Pentecost. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, they were empowered to take up the preaching, teaching, healing, caring ministry of Jesus Christ. Their joy, excitement and enthusiasm were so dramatic that some of the people who witnessed this miraculous outpouring thought they were under the influence, that they had been drinking too much wine.

Well, they were under the influence, but not that spirit. They were under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Do you think that anyone would ever look at the church today, at our church and make that assumption?

There is an old story that Erma Bombeck told about a little boy at church with his mother. He was a good little boy, quiet and well behaved. He didn't cause any problems. But every once in a while he would stand up in the pew, turn around, look at the people behind him and smile at them.

His smile was infectious, and soon everybody behind him was starting to smile back at him, too. It was all going fine until the mother realized what the little boy was doing. When she did, she grabbed him by his ear and twisted it a bit, told him to sit down and remember that he was in church.

Then he started sniffing and crying, and she turned to him and said, "That's better." It's kind of sad, isn't it, that some have the impression that when we come to church that it is all gloom and doom, and that there is nothing here to really bring joy into our lives?

It's sad that in many of our churches you look around and you see very little power. There is very little joy.

But Pentecost reminds us that the early Christians discovered a source of power that could not be quenched. They discovered a joy unspeakable. Friends I believe what we need today is to experience again the power of Pentecost. We need fresh wind and fresh fire.

So my question this morning is how do we get it? What was it about that first Pentecost? What was it that enabled the Spirit to come in such a powerful way? What was it that enabled the wind of the Spirit to blow and the flame of Spirit to ignite the hearts of God's people with such power and passion? What must exist in us, around us, and through us, if we are to have fresh wind, fresh fire? Simply these three things:

1. We are to be in one accord. When the day of Pentecost came, we learn that the apostles were all together in one place. They had gathered in one place, and were of one mind. As they waited and anticipated the promise that Jesus had made them they were together in unity and harmony. And that's when the Holy Spirit came.

This power comes on a day when they were in one accord, that's the King James Version. In other words, there was unity and agreement. There was a commonality among them. They shared all things in common; we learn later. It is important to note that it would not be that way forever. Later a major split would occur in the church over who should get in. It has been said that Peter and Paul came out fighting and its been going on in the church ever since. But, in the early days, there was one accord. It was to that setting that the Holy Spirit came.

Would you be surprised if I told you that there are several congregations around this town that have a reputation, well deserved I might add, of constant in-fighting. You never know how these things get started, but they end up creating a poisonous atmosphere. Sometimes people love their ideas more than they love Jesus. Nothing takes the place of community. If we expect great things to happen, then we must be of one accord.

2. Secondly, and for this one I have to dip back into last week's Scripture Acts 1:14. There we are told: "They all joined together constantly in prayer." Do you know where the church is growing the fastest? Not in the United States, but Korea, Africa, and Latin America. For some years now there have been massive revivals taking place in these southern countries. Ask the Korean Methodist ministers and they will tell you that the cornerstone of this revival is prayer.

While it is true that churches that are together, in one accord can accomplish much, no church can be truly faithful, if it does not pray. And it seems to me that much of the church has lapsed into a weekly routine of Sunday morning sermons and Sunday school. We have lost our desire to dedicate ourselves to prayer expecting the Holy Spirit to move in our presence and change lives.

Too many people are trying to go it alone. Too many churches are trying to go it alone. They act as though the only thing that can occur with prayer is what psychologically takes place within a person. If we are to come into God's presence, then we must ask to be in His presence.

So we have a need to pray in order for God to order our lives. But there is another reason, and I think it is the greater reason. I want to read to you what the President said about our nation:

"We have been the recipients of the greatest blessings of heaven. We have been preserved in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand, which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.

Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to God that made us. We should be moved then to humble ourselves before the God, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness."

The President said this on April 30, 1863! Abraham Lincoln said these words proclaiming a National Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer. Our need for prayer has not changed. Nations as well as churches and individual people stand in need of prayer. Prayer for guidance. Prayer for deliverance. Prayer to shape us into people of integrity. Prayer to God to forgive us of our sins. Which brings us to our third point.

3. If we are to feel fresh wind and be touched with fresh fire we need to repent. If there is a moral crisis in the life of a person, he or she must repent. If there is a moral crisis in the event of a nation, it must repent. If there is a moral crisis in the life of a church, she must repent. Pentecost is possible only where sin is adequately dealt with. Peter, the churches first leader, understood this. In the very first sermon of the church Peter reminded them of their most egregious error: God was at work through Jesus, Peter proclaimed to them, but you handed him over, put him to death nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead and exalted to the right hand of God. He then repeated the accusation one more time in verse 36: "Let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

When he had finished giving his sermon, which takes up the last half of chapter two, the people ask of him: "What shall we do?" His response: Repent. John Wesley preached more sermons on the text: "Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand," than any other text. It is the basic requirement for entrance into the Kingdom.

But what is repentance, you might ask? For these first believers it was simply this: Changing their mind. Realizing their error. Accepting the one they once condemned.

Becoming what they once ridiculed. Receiving Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins. That my friend is repentance! And it has not changed. It is by this act that we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit today. Through unity, prayer, and repentance we can harness the power of the Spirit.

I close with this story. The village atheist was not a bad man, he just didn't believe. He was not interested in church...and there was only one in the area. It was cold and dead—a social club, with no lives being changed, no real ministry happening.

One day the church building caught on fire, and the whole town ran toward it to help extinguish the flames...including the village atheist!

Someone hollered out: "Hey, this is something new for you, the first time we've ever seen you running to church!" He replied, "This is the first time I've ever seen the church on fire!"

My desire is that our area will never be able to say that they haven't seen a church on fire. May Sterling UMC be that church! As today, on this Pentecost Sunday we allow the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit to send us fresh wind and fresh fire!