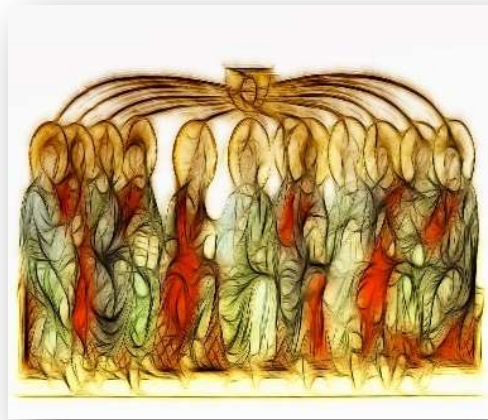


Empowered to Minister Forgiveness

By Bill Lawson

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Today we celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Some days of celebration on the Christian calendar come at times when current events in our daily lives make celebration difficult. The first Pentecost was celebrated shortly after Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension at the beginning of a great persecution of Christians that intensified over several hundred years. Yet, we, as they did, celebrate that God is with us in the midst of all our heartbreaks and sorrows to strengthen and guide us. Jesus called the Holy Spirit the "Comforter,"¹ and we are so very thankful for the comfort she brings in difficult times. Francis Bottome wrote in his hymn,²

The Comforter has come, the Comforter has come!
The Holy Ghost from heaven, the Father's promise given;

The first empowerment of the Holy Ghost specified by Jesus after the Resurrection is the power to forgive sins. Paul further addressed in his writings the additional powers to minister spiritual gifts and to bear spiritual fruits. Together, these powers enable us to learn how to keep the commandment of Jesus, to love others as Christ has loved us,³ and to serve the world in the ministry of God's unconditional, universal forgiveness and love.

God's dream always was to pour out the Holy Spirit on all humanity, inclusively and without exception, as Peter explained on the Day of Pentecost, citing the prophet Joel. We are empowered individually and collectively, as Jesus promised at his Ascension: "And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high."⁴

Our acceptance of this empowerment is a personal decision we make in our relationship with God.

At Pentecost, the birthday of the Torah became the birthday of the Church.⁵ Israel formally became an institutional nation, "a constitutional body," as Kaufmann Kolher wrote in the Jewish Encyclopedia,⁶ with the giving of the law on the 50th day after the Passover during the Wilderness Sojourn. Likewise, the Church formally became an ecclesiastical body on the 50th day after the Passover, at which Jesus gave the New Commandment.⁷

Jesus sends us to extend God's forgiveness wherever we go.

Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained. *(John 20:21-23 KJV)*

Jesus breathed on them the Holy Spirit, the essence, the breath of God. The Hebrew word for *spirit* throughout the Old Testament and the Greek word of the New Testament share the exact same definition according to the Old and New Testament lexicons.⁸ The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, the spiritual presence of the Almighty Triune God.

Jesus spoke peace to the Apostles and through them to us and through us to the world. This is the Peace of Christ, the peace from the gospel of salvation and healing whose heart is forgiveness in the fullest and most comprehensive sense. It is the “peace of God, which passeth all understanding”⁹ as Paul put it in his letter to the Philippians.

The word translated *peace* in this verse is the feminine Greek noun *eirene* defined in the New Testament Greek Lexicon in part as “the tranquil state of a soul assured of its salvation through Christ, and so fearing nothing from God and content with its earthly lot, of whatsoever sort that is.”¹⁰ Christ brings us into harmony with each other and calms the troubled waters of our lives. Christ soothes the deepest wounds of our souls and heals our broken hearts. Like the shepherd of Psalm 23,

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.¹¹

As Jesus sent the Apostles, Christ sends us under the powerful anointing of the same Holy Ghost to minister the healing balm of forgiveness to everyone in our lives. The forgiveness process includes release, tolerance, and understanding that leads toward eventual reconciliation.

One important element of forgiveness is the release it provides, not only to others but to ourselves. When Jesus forgave his tormenters from the Cross, it made no immediate difference to them, but it did immediately release Jesus from that part of his suffering. We need that sense of release, not only from the hurt placed on us by others but also from the burdens life puts on us, even without malice of any kind. From the swirl of questions to which we can find no answers, from the heartaches brought by the inexplicable loss of people we love, from the fears and anxieties of unknown twists and turns as we press into the future, from the torments of situations beyond our control, we need release. Whether it's their fault, our fault, or no one's fault, we still need to find release just the same. Forgiveness is, in great part, the practice of letting go of pain regardless of its source.

Tolerance is another important aspect of forgiveness. The Holy Spirit enlarges our love to encompass more people the way God's love encompasses the whole world. We embrace others, fully and freely, with the same “no strings attached” attitude with which God has thankfully already embraced us, as expressed by Charlotte Elliott in her hymn,

Just as I am, thou wilt receive,
wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
because thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.¹²

Seeing in others what God sees in us empowers us to be empathetic and understanding of

their predicament, even if it is vastly different from our own. Sometimes, we even start to realize that perhaps we aren't so different at all. The 19th century Methodist preacher Mary Lathrap in her poem, "Judge Softly,"¹³ famously wrote,

Just walk a mile in [their] moccasins
 Before you abuse, criticize and accuse.
 If just for one hour, you could find a way
 To see through [their] eyes,
 instead of your own muse.

Reconciliation can only come through forgiveness. Many circumstances make reconciliation difficult to achieve and may take a long time, but it can only begin with forgiveness, which may also be difficult. Desmond Tutu demonstrated the transformative power of reconciliation on a national scale as he led South Africa through the process, serving as chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission¹⁴ after the abuses of institutionalized apartheid in that country. The Bible says that God in Christ was at work on the Cross on a universal scale to reconcile everyone and everything in Heaven and on Earth.¹⁵ We are invited and empowered to be part of that great universal process Paul called "the ministry of reconciliation."¹⁶

The Apostolic sending is grounded in forgiveness. We are sent to proclaim and extend God's forgiveness to the world. God's forgiveness is unconditional, as demonstrated by Jesus on the Cross¹⁷ and Stephen at his martyrdom.¹⁸ We have the power to forgive or to withhold forgiveness, but that choice on our part still comes with the results and consequences Jesus taught immediately after giving the Lord's Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount, "But if ye forgive not [others] their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."¹⁹

God empowers and sends everyone to share their part of the divine revelation.

But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young [people] shall see visions, and your old [people] shall dream dreams: And on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy: (Acts 2:16-18 KJV)

Believe and receive. The Holy Spirit has been poured out on all people for all time and eternity and is received individually as each person enters into a personal saving relationship with Christ by faith. After Peter's sermon, the people asked what they could do to make things right, and Peter told them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."²⁰

The outpouring and empowerment of the Holy Spirit is inclusive of all people, regardless of gender issues, social-economic predicaments, legal status, age, ethnicity, or any other characteristic.

For, [Paul wrote,] ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.²¹

There are no exceptions or restrictions. The various certifications for ministry offered by The United Methodist Church support the wide variety of prophetic gifts and graces. Our congregation and others continue to advocate for the removal of the unjust restrictions on ordination and pastoral appointments so recently added to the Discipline in 1974 against one single group of people. We also advocate for cessation of *unwritten* restrictions often practiced through discrimination and oppression against various other groups of people.

The Bible says, "saith God,... they shall prophesy."²² They *shall* speak forth the mind and counsel of God. They *shall* preach and teach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They *shall* be Christ's witnesses "unto the uttermost part of the earth."²³ They *shall* minister the gifts of the Holy Spirit according to their various callings. They *shall* bear the fruits of the spirit in their ministries. Men, women, children, even animals as demonstrated by Balaam's donkey,²⁴ shall prophesy under the same power and anointing Peter attested to about the Scriptures, that "holy [people] of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."²⁵

We seek to express this fulness and unity of spiritual empowerment in our community through the official Inclusiveness Statement of our congregation:

We invite everyone to share fully in the worship services, life, ministry, and leadership of Briensburg United Methodist Church, inclusive of age, race, nationality, gender, LGBTQ, theology, politics, and legal status.²⁶

The Spirit reshapes us in her love.

Thou sendest forth thy spirit, they are created: and thou renewest the face of the earth.
(*Psalm 104:30 KJV*)

The same spirit who "moved upon the face of the waters"²⁷ at the beginning of the Bible continues to shape the world and its inhabitants with the renewing influence of her love. This is the same seven-fold spirit of whom Isaiah prophesied regarding the Messiah, writing,

And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD;²⁸

This is the same spirit by whom Jesus, as we affirm in the Apostles' Creed,²⁹ was conceived and born of the Virgin Mary, who descended on Jesus like a dove at his baptism, whom Jesus referred to throughout his ministry, and who was poured out on all people on the Day of Pentecost. This same spirit continues to extend the ancient invitation from the end of the Bible,

And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let [they] that heareth say, Come. And let [they who are] athirst come. And whosoever will, let [them] take the water of life freely.³⁰

Christ sends us by the Holy Spirit as one body in ministry to the world.

Wherefore I give you to understand, that no [one] speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no [one] can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost. (1 *Corinthians 12:3b KJV*)

“Jesus is Lord” is the shortest, most universal affirmation of faith in the Bible and among Christians. This simple affirmation both unites those who agree that “Jesus is Lord,” and divides us from those who don’t.³¹ From there, we seem to diverge rapidly. The more we say about our faith the more we acknowledge differences between those of varying perspectives. The solution is not to stop sharing our faith, but rather to be as tolerant and forgiving of others as we hope they will be of us. By sharing the tenets of each other’s religion, everyone’s different notes are brought into the harmony of one love song as alluded to in Acts 2:1,

When the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.³²

We are not called to conformity or uniformity but to unity in our renewal as Paul wrote to the Romans,

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.³³

The spirit empowers us not only to *tolerate* each other’s differences but to *celebrate* our diversity as a manifestation of God’s love. Biblical diversity is celebrated in Acts chapter 2 by the outpouring of the Holy Ghost on all the tongues and nationalities of people dwelling in Jerusalem, representative of “every nation under heaven,”³⁴ as the Bible says.

The Holy Spirit distributes the spiritual gifts as she determines is best for the renewal of the Earth and of all its inhabitants. Paul used the metaphor of the human body in this passage to describe our unity in Christ that transcends all our beliefs, practices, and associations.

Earlier in the same letter, Paul had asked the rhetorical question, “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?”³⁵ In his article, “The Spirit After Pentecost,” Daniel J. Brendsel wrote, “Ecclesially, the Spirit transforms all of God’s people — men and women, young and old — into the temple of God.”³⁶ Everyone has their part in the Body of Christ without exclusion. No matter how differently we understand or apply our beliefs at any given time, we still each have gifts to minister under the leadership of Christ and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

Throughout chapter twelve, Paul gave several examples of spiritual gifts and their importance to the proper functioning of the Body of Christ, regardless of whom the Holy Spirit has called to minister those gifts. He went on in chapter thirteen, “the Love Chapter,” to give a more comprehensive view, “a more excellent way.”³⁷ Paul continued in chapter fourteen with a discussion of the gift of prophecy and the gift of tongues, as translated in the Jerusalem Bible:

You must want love more than anything else; but still hope for the spiritual gifts as well, especially prophecy. Anybody with the gift of tongues speaks to God, but not to other people; because nobody understands [them] when [they] talk in the spirit about mysterious things. On the other hand, the [person] who prophesies does talk to other people, to their improvement, their encouragement and their consolation. The one with the gift of tongues talks for his [or her] own benefit, but the [person] who prophesies does so for the benefit of the community.³⁸

Conclusion

Christ Jesus sends us to proclaim God's love and forgiveness by the power of the Holy Spirit working within and among us. Christ is the sovereign head of the universal body of all believers. The Holy Spirit is guiding us, shaping our relationships, and transforming the world through her fully inclusive love and power. She empowers us with spiritual gifts to bear spiritual fruits as we learn how to love and praise God and continue the ministry and vision of Jesus through all our relationships.

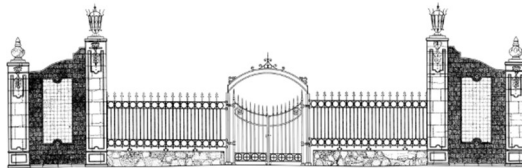
In the midst of untimely death and heartbreaking tragedy, we proclaim life beyond death and continuing spiritual renewal. In the face of unfairness, sorrow, and polarization, we announce forgiveness and reconciliation. Under the burden of deep despair, we open the wounds of our souls to the healing consolation, love, and joy the Comforter ministers to us and through us.

We join Charles Wesley in the sometimes difficult acclamation he wrote in his hymn,³⁹

O for a thousand tongues to sing
my great Redeemer's praise,
the glories of my God and King,
the triumphs of his grace!

In Christ, your head, you then shall know,
Shall feel your sins forgiven;
Anticipate your heaven below,
and own that love is heaven.

In the Name of Jesus, Amen.



Empowered to Minister Forgiveness

Manuscript of the sermon preached by Rev. Bill Lawson on May 28, 2023, at Briensburg UMC
Bible Readings for Pentecost, Revised Common Lectionary
Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 20:19-23

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