

## **What Does This Mean?**

John 15: 26-27, 16:4b-15

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*John 15: 26-27, 16:4b-15*

”When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning. I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts.

Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

*The Day of Pentecost* (A dramatic retelling of the events of Pentecost, for two voices)

First voice: It was Pentecost – the Feast of Weeks - fifty days after Passover, so Jerusalem was bustling – full of people come to make their offering of first-fruits as thanks to God for bringing us home after years of wandering in the wilderness. And I was there too.

Second voice: We were all together, us disciples, inside away from the crowds, when suddenly the whole house was filled with the sound of rushing wind. It was terrifying. Shocking. Violent. And then there was fire ... flames flickering above our heads, a tongue of flame hovering above each of us like a shimmering bird. And then it was as if the fire that breathed above us suddenly blazed within us. God’s Holy Spirit lived in us and moved in us and we found ourselves filled with new and sudden knowledge. I began to speak. We all did. Every language under heaven came pouring out of our mouths. We rushed outside. All around us people were staring open-mouthed. But if you think they were shocked, it was nothing to what we were feeling. Suddenly I was a linguist and not only that, I knew what to say. All this power – God’s power – was pouring through me. I threw my arms in the air and I laughed with the wonder of it. No wonder people thought that we were drunk.

First voice: That’s what I thought. Disgraceful, I thought, totally blotto at this time in a morning. Shouting, waving their arms about, fighting drunk, I thought and I decided to give them a wide berth. But then, out of the jumble of sounds they were making I caught a phrase, 'God’s deeds of power', and I stared. It was in my language. My own language. I’m from Cyrene and since when did Galileans speak my language? There were Parthians in the crowd and Elamites, Mesopotamians, Egyptians – you get the picture – the world and his wife were there. And these

men, these country bumpkin Jews from the sticks of Galilee were speaking to all of them. In their own languages. It was amazing. I mean, since when did uneducated men like that get to be experts in dozens of languages? But they weren't drunk – I realized that – well, not drunk on wine at any rate.

Second voice:

The crowd were pretty stirred up by what we were doing and that's when Peter spoke, reciting the prophesy of Joel:

'In the last days, God declares, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show signs in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

<https://www.rootsontheweb.com/seasons-and-festivals/church-seasons/pentecost/resources-for-celebrating-pentecost/drama/dramatic-reading-the-day-of-pentecost>)

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In the traditional biblical reading from the book of Acts<sup>i</sup> which was adapted for our dramatic lesson, there is a very important question asked following all the chaos and confusion, the rushing wild wind, the many languages impossibly yet suddenly spoken, the dancing flames hovering like birds, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit woefully misunderstood as morning drunkenness.

All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"

That's a very good question. What does this all mean?

Scottish theologian and scholar, William Barclay<sup>ii</sup>, offered this insightful reflection as one answer, "We may never know precisely what happened on the Day of Pentecost but we do know that it was one of the supremely great days of the Christian Church...the Spirit was the source of day-to-day courage and power...Peter's courage and eloquence before the Sanhedrin are the result of the activity of the Spirit...The Christian courage to meet the dangerous situation, the Christian power to cope with life more than adequately, the Christian eloquence when eloquence is needed, the Christian joy which is independent of circumstances are all ascribed to the work of the Spirit."

Peter's bold and daring message to all the people gathered—Jews, including the legislative assembly of the Sanhedrin as well as the ordinary faithful-- who had come from all over a vast region on a pilgrimage for the feast of Pentecost, the Feast of Booths, the holiday that commemorates the single most important event in Israel's history: the giving of the Torah--the first five books in the Hebrew Bible-- to Moses at Mount Sinai—tells us that yes, the coming of the Spirit, the Advocate, at Pentecost, is about courage and power. Peter was the first of the 120 disciples and followers to speak with the new Spirit-given courage and power to transcend differences. Barriers of language, culture and gender were broken wide open. The power of the Holy Spirit caused the crowds to not only *hear* Peter's message but to also *receive* it to such an extent that 3,000 people made an immediate decision to also follow Jesus.

The Spirit inspired Peter to cope with life more than adequately, and with a new holy boldness of Christian eloquence, and to do so with complete joy and delight. Just seven weeks ago he was denying Christ and avoiding bearing witness to Jesus' crucifixion. Now he is a preacher on fire for the good news.

In our own time, a time of polemic political turmoil, a time of personal rights at risk, a time of global climate desperation, a time of an increasingly secular society, a time of unimaginable humanitarian catastrophe and conflict where the Advocate had come in on the rush of the wind as the birthing of the tasks to which the resurrected Jesus called his followers just before he ascended into heaven, how is the Holy Spirit rushing to us, inspiring and empowering us with coping skills, courage, eloquence and joy, to see visions and to dream dreams?

On this day, the birthday of the capital C Church, we remember that the Spirit came upon the people as a group. Peter was as always, the first to speak, but all the disciples, all the followers, had a Spirit tongue of fire upon them, all spoke eloquently in new languages, all together made a difference, all participated, as witnesses to the end of the earth.

UCC minister Jake Miles Joseph reminds us that, "Easter is when we learn that the Church cannot die, it survives, it lives on! But it is at Pentecost that we learn that we are all in this together, that humans can do the work, that God and Gospel are bigger than divisions of language and geography, and that we are resilient. Pentecost is when we find out that we are not alone on this. Pentecost is when we get the greatest gift of all—the Holy Spirit and the love of Christians beyond our own rooms is made known."<sup>iii</sup>

May the Pentecost Spirit blow fresh new winds of reconciliation and oneness across the ever-growing divisions within Christianity, that we may follow Jesus' bold, Great Commandment to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.<sup>iv</sup>

And it is no wonder then that this is the day when we as a denomination, as the United Church of Christ, receive our Strengthen the Church offering, enabling our shared gifts to empower new and renewed ministries of our siblings in faith. The Spirit breaks through in bold new ways of worship, mission and ministry for the visions and the dreams of the witnesses today.

And what about the vision and the dreams for Smith Church? Where is the Advocate blowing in on the rush of the wind, empowering us with new and creative words of outreach and community to cope adequately in uncertain times and all in the spirit of Christian joy?

Dinner church, soft plastic recycling, and a memory café are new visions and dreams being made real that join all the youth groups, Pj's & Pizza, Family Promise, Prayer Shawl, the senior exercise group, live streamed worship, AA, WIC, and our many community events and connections. All of these Spirit-inspired dreams and visions continue the long traditions of this church, of which we are now the witnesses and stewards.

In 1921, George Waldo Browne<sup>v</sup>, wrote of the history of Smith Church in *'The History of Hillsborough, New Hampshire 1735-1921'*, and ended with these words: "The successful church can never be idle, and among its virtues Smith Memorial Church numbers that of activity, which neither age nor change of shepherds has ever checked, and today its field of usefulness was never better tilled, not its promises brighter."

What does this mean? It means that Smith Church, called by the faithful and joyful Spirit, rooted in the love and teachings of Jesus Christ, and the creativity and welcome of God's realm, has, does and will be deeply committed to making a difference in our local communities and the world, with bright promises for now and for the future. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Acts 2:1-21

<sup>ii</sup> William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1978), 18-19.

<sup>iii</sup> Jake Miles Joseph, <https://firstchurchguilford.org/sermon/a-progressive-pentecost-the-united-church-of-christ/>

<sup>iv</sup> Mt 22: 37-39

<sup>v</sup> Brown, George Waldo; *The History of Hillsborough, New Hampshire 1735-1921*, vol 1, pg 353