

# The Balloon Powered Church

## Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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May 11, 2008

**Today is the Day of Pentecost! Today we celebrate:** we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit – God's guiding presence with us and within us; we celebrate the birth and life of the Christian Church – and this particular community of faith; and we will celebrate with the Sacrament of The Lord's Supper. As an added bonus, on this particular Day of Pentecost we also celebrate Mother's Day. That's a lot to celebrate!

Most of you are probably familiar with the story of Pentecost as recorded in the book of Acts, which by way, was written by the gospel writer Luke. It's a remarkably bizarre story filled with special effects of colorful sights and sounds: loud rushing wind, tongues of fire, speaking in foreign languages, and being able to hear and understand in one's own native language.

**What the story of Pentecost is really all about is the forming and empowering of a new community** – a community of believers that experience the empowerment of God's presence, who then go out to bear witness to that powerful presence. Today we call that evangelism.

This story, written some 40-50 years after Jesus' death, answers the question: **When, where, why and how did the Christian Church begin?**

Jesus, their prophet, teacher and leader, had been killed. Under normal circumstances, any movement would have simply faded away after losing such a leader. The miracle of Easter, in part, is that this group of Jesus' followers was able to experience the ongoing presence of Christ with them. Yet, **since Jesus' death they were still basically just a powerless, fearful handful of followers – until the day of Pentecost.**

**This story of Pentecost is how Luke explains that God was not just present in the Temple, nor just present in Jesus, but that God was (and is) also present in the community of faith, and within each individual believer.**

This story also reveals that the Spirit of the God of love, the Spirit of the living Christ functions, in essence, to create and empower a new and dynamic community. That was the case 2000 years ago, this is still the case today!

True community, then, from a biblical standpoint, is first and foremost a gift of God, through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes it's good to remind ourselves of that. **Genuine community, including our sense of community here at College Hill, is ultimately built not just on mutual compatibility, shared affection,**

**or even common interests. True community is built on nothing less than the power of God within and among us.**

A United Methodist pastor serving in Vestal, New York, the Rev. Nancy Topolewski, puts it this way, "Community is built upon having received the same divine breath, having been given a heart set aflame by the same divine fire, and having been embraced by the same divine love." We are a true community because we experience the same divine breath, the same divine fire, the same divine love.

**This story of Pentecost also reveals part of the original intention of the church: to embody unity in the midst of diversity.** But yes, we still struggle today in often-intense ways with how to respect our differences – differences not only with culture, race, language, gender, sexual orientation, education, economic status, and politics, but also with our differences in faith and theological perspective.

And yes, all those differences can be found not only between ourselves as a congregation and folks "out there" but also within this very congregation. But that's a good thing! **Each one of us is unique and different, but together, thanks to God's Spirit, we are enabled and empowered to become one community of faith.**

We are called, therefore, as a congregation to reflect this miracle of Pentecost. We accomplish this, in part, by genuinely listening to and trying to understand one another – just as that diverse crowd did on that first Pentecost morning.

The story of goes on to reveal that the community of faith that is fashioned by the God-within us, the Holy Spirit, is not created simply for the well-being of its own members. A true biblical understanding of the role of the church, therefore, instructs us that **our particular community of faith does not exist solely for our personal well-being.** And I know you know that. **The coming of the Holy Spirit on that first day of Pentecost, and ever since, is for the empowerment of the community to be sent out into the world so that all people can hear and share in the Good News of the gospel of Jesus Christ.**

Again, today we call that **evangelism.** I'm sure you can tell by now that I think it's important that we **re-claim** the important theological meaning of that word – and **rescue it from being over-connection with evangelicalism,** which is simply one particular style, expression and viewpoint of the Christian faith.

We see evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit working within and among us when we are able to look beyond our own varied differences (and even disagreements) and band together in common ministry and mission and purpose. In other words, being empowered to seek unity in the midst of our diversity.

This is what it means, in part, to be filled with the Holy Spirit. **To help make this point about how the church is filled with the Holy Spirit, I'd like to make the analogy of how it compares to a balloon filled with air.** (I'm sure you were wondering when I'd get to the balloon part of this sermon.)

Please take the balloon that you were given at the beginning of this service. Your balloon, at this point, is not full of air. It is a lifeless balloon. It continues to just lie wherever you put it. It doesn't move. It has no power. The balloon isn't doing what it was created to do.

But take that balloon now and do what the Holy Spirit did to those disciples at Pentecost – fill it with power. (That means blow up your balloon, or have a neighbor do it for you.) Then hold onto it without tying it off.

What has happened? It's now full of air. It is still basically lifeless, however. It goes nowhere until that power is released. The point is this: **God did not fill those first disciples with the power of the Holy Spirit so that they could just stay behind locked doors cowering in fear. They, and the church today, are given the power of God's Spirit to move out into the world and make a difference.**

I want everyone, now, on the count of three, to release your balloon – 1, 2, 3...

With the release of the air's power, the balloon can move. It goes out. When the wind power within the balloon is released, however, we don't know where the balloon is going to go; but we know it's going somewhere. When we release the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in this congregation we don't always know where we're going to go either. We just need to trust that it's wherever the Spirit wants us to go. **Do we have the courage to go where we discern the Holy Spirit is leading us?**

What has happened to our balloons, now, however? They are depleted of their air, their wind power. They are again lifeless until they are filled anew with air and re-released. **Just as a balloon needs to go back to its source of energy and power to recharge, so do we – and that means going back to God. Often! Every day! Maybe several times every day!**

Even though the Spirit of God is always with us and always within us (that's the promise of our Baptism), **do we not need to experience a sense of being re-filled and re-energized and renewed by God's Spirit from time to time?** Hopefully that is what happens every time we worship and share communion, study and fellowship and pray together, and serve others.

There's one final analogy I'd like to make. What happens to a balloon that is filled with air after several days of just sitting there? Over time, the air slowly leaks out – the power leaves. The balloon, without doing anything, will go flat. The same is true with muscles. Muscles that aren't used lose their strength through atrophy and inactivity. Can the same thing happen with faith, or the gift of the Holy Spirit?

**The power that God gives you and me and the church (working through our time, talents and resources) is expected to be shared and used for the common good of all.** God calls us to be good stewards, and to use wisely all that God has blessed us with – **to expend that never-ending source of energy and power, only to repeat the cycle again and again: refill-expend; refill-expend...**

It is my hope and prayer that you and I, and this congregation, will be filled and re-filled (like a balloon) with the empowering presence of God through the

Holy Spirit to go where the Spirit directs us, and *do* as Christ guides us – and always as a diverse yet unified community of faith.

Happy Pentecost!  
Amen.