

# Pentecost: The Holy Spirit Builds Community

## Pentecost Sunday

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

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*May 31, 2009*

You know the story. It's the same fantastic one every year on Pentecost Sunday, from the second chapter of the Book of Acts. Acts, by the way, was written by the same author who wrote the Gospel of Luke. While the gospel tells the story of the life and ministry of Jesus, the Book of Acts goes on to tell the story of the life and ministry of the early church.

The biblical author begins by telling us that the disciples, several weeks following Jesus' death and resurrection, were all gathered together in a house in Jerusalem. **He describes the coming of the Holy Spirit as a sound:** a sound like the rush of a violent wind filling the house where they were sitting. Then he presents the bizarre visual image of divided tongues, as of fire, resting on each of the disciples. Verse 4 of Acts 2 states, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

Hearing the commotion, a large crowd gathers outside the house. We're told that these people were a culturally diverse group of devout Jews from almost every nation in the ancient world.

The miracle presented in the story of Pentecost isn't just that the disciples began to speak in different languages, but also that everyone in the crowd was able to hear what was being said in their own native language. Put most simply, **the miracle was one of communication – the ability to speak and to hear and understand.**

The result of sharing the good news of the mighty works of God through Jesus was the formation and empowerment of a new community – a community that experiences and then witnesses to God's loving presence. In other words, though a bit oversimplified, **the presence of the Holy Spirit built community through the ability to communicate.**

This story, which is believed to have been written down by Luke some 40-50 years *after* Jesus' death, basically 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 – religious or political – would have simply faded away after losing such a dynamic leader. The miracle in the Resurrection story, which we celebrated 50 days ago on Easter Sunday, 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 just a powerless, fearful handful of followers. That is, until the day of Pentecost.

**The story of Pentecost is how Luke explains that God was not just present in the religious temple, that God was not just present in the person of Jesus, but that God was (and is) also present in the community of faith and *within* each individual believer.**

It's almost impossible for us to realize how radical a development this was in the theological understanding of the nature and character of God. It was unheard of up to this point in religious thought that Almighty God, the Creator of the entire universe, dwells *within* people of faith.

Again, the Spirit of the God of love, the Spirit of the living Christ, in essence, functions to create and empower a new community – a community that became the Christian Church. True community, therefore, is first and foremost a gift of God, through the Holy Spirit. Sometimes it's good to remind ourselves of that.

True community, including *our* sense of community here at College Hill, is ultimately built, then, not just on mutual compatibility, shared affection, or even common interests or theological perspectives – as important as those things are. True community, the Pentecost story tells us, 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." Our congregation is a true community because we experience the same divine breath, the same divine fire, the same divine love.

The question I would like to raise today, and I offer it to you for your serious consideration, is: **How can we assist the indwelling presence of God's Spirit to help us grow deeper into the community of faith that God would have us become?**

Our sense of community, of being family, is indeed already strong here in this congregation. But **what else can we do to grow even deeper in relationship with God and with one another?**

That's a question that is always at the forefront of my thoughts and prayers as your pastor. It's also a question that our Acts 16:5 Leadership Team reflects upon every time we gather each month. It was last summer, for example during one of our monthly meetings that we discerned the need to hold an **All-Church Retreat** – a retreat with the expressed purpose of helping us to draw closer to God *and* one another.

Originally scheduled for last fall, we postponed the retreat until early this past spring. **An often-heard comment reflecting upon the significance of that retreat was how meaningful it was to break out into small groups** so that each person had a better chance to share their personal thoughts along with some information about themselves and their life journey, and in turn, to learn more

about others. **It helped illustrate yet again how the Holy Spirit builds community through communication – the active sharing of and listening to the stories of each others' lives.**

In the monthly meetings since that retreat, our Acts 16:5 Leadership Team has been brainstorming how we can continue the development of that sense of community, caring, and belonging.

One thing we are already currently implementing is **transforming our church committees to ministry teams**. Yet the question I posed before the Elders on the Session at last month's meeting was, "Are we actually functioning differently, or did we just change the name?" One of the best ways to evaluate that is to ask of the Session and each ministry team not only, "How did we do in following through with our tasks and in planning the work ahead of us?" but also asking, "**How are we growing in relationship? How are we caring for one another? How are we growing in discipleship?**"

**In other words, yes, there are still tasks to perform in running a church, but if we aren't growing closer to God and one another in the process, then we're missing the boat.**

The Acts 16:5 Leadership Team has also been doing a lot of discerning lately about what the next step should be in involving the entire congregation. And this is what we have come up with: **Implement an intentional Small Group Ministry initiative and program here at College Hill.**

Some of you may be familiar with small groups, also often called covenant groups, or discipleship groups. They can be a powerful way to make a congregation more vibrant, dynamic, relevant, and healthy. **These types of groups can provide an opportunity for church members to build friendships, feel connected, develop a stronger sense of belonging, and lead to spiritual growth and discipleship.**

So here's what I am envisioning. **Let's spend the summer exploring the best way to implement a small group ministry program; let's recruit and train group facilitators; and let's select the specific types of small groups to form.** Then, after careful preparation, **let's have a big kick off of our small groups in September.** Perhaps we can ask everyone in the congregation to commit to a small group for 9 months or a year, and then take stock in how effective they have been in building community here at College Hill.

Perhaps the best examples of small groups that are already active and effective are the monthly Book Club group and the weekly Hispanic Prayer Group. Here are some ideas, currently a work in progress at this point, of other types of small groups that could form. These have come out of ideas from church school participants, the Session, and from the brainstorming of the Acts 16:5 Leadership Team.

- Book Study Group
- Meditation Group
- Spirituality Group
- Young Parents Group

- LGBT Group
- Work Projects Group
- Dinners for 7 or 8
- And perhaps a variety of support-type groups, like a Grief Support group, or a Dealing with Aging Parents group

**What other types of small groups would you personally be interested in? What's simmering on your burner that you would like the church to help you respond to? We want to know. Who among you would consider being a facilitator for a small group?**

For those of you interested in exploring some of this on your own, there are several very helpful books and Internet websites, including [smallgroups.com](http://smallgroups.com) and [smallgroupministry.com](http://smallgroupministry.com).

**My goal this morning is to simply plant a seed, and then with your help discern how, or if, the Holy Spirit helps it grow within you and the congregation.** Personally, I am very excited in the potential that small group ministry holds for us in empowering an already healthy congregation into a deeper dimension of personal and spiritual growth.

And as you reflect upon these things, **remember all of this in the context of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit breathed life into the church, primarily through the gift of communication to build community.**

Yet, regardless of where we go from here as a congregation, know that each and every one of us has an important part to play in our mission and ministry of **living out this gift of community!**

Amen.