

**“The Spirit Empowers” [Full length version for 11:00am service]**

**Acts 1:1-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-26**

**Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – November 15, 2009**

**A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden Copyright: 2009, Ivan Peden  
MUMC, Thomasville, NC**

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Throughout the Old Testament there is a deep conviction that no one can do the work of God without the empowerment of the Holy Spirit; no one can lead others for God who is not led by the Holy Spirit. God’s spirit gives to Joseph the ability to govern in Egypt; to Deborah the discernment to be a fair judge; to David, the shepherd boy, the skill to deal with a giant enemy, Goliath; and to Jeremiah and all the prophets the words of warning and hope to guide God’s people.

The Holy Spirit empowers Jesus, from his conception, and throughout his ministry, to teach and to heal. And before Jesus’ ascension to heaven, he gives his followers a mandate designed to motivate them for the task ahead. Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit in his place.

It is important that we not isolate the Person of the Holy Spirit from the Person of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is like Jesus, who is like God. The Holy Spirit thinks, wills, and feels like Jesus. It is quite accurate to describe the Holy Spirit as the spirit of Christ. So when the Holy Spirit descended upon those eleven believers in the Upper Room in Jerusalem with blessing and with grace on the Day of Pentecost, this was no stranger in their midst. They recognized the Holy Spirit as the spirit of Jesus.

The Bible reveals that the Holy Spirit will continue to inspire us by guiding us into the truth about Jesus and about ourselves. The Holy Spirit will reveal to us God’s “big picture” and God’s will for the future (John 16:8-13). God’s spirit helps us to pray (Romans 8:26), to communicate to others about Christ (Mark 13:11), to love (Galatians 5:22), and to do what is right (1 John 2:27). When we become Christians, the Holy Spirit enters our lives, and will never leave us.

Acts 1:8 records how Jesus prepared his disciples to receive the Holy Spirit, saying:  
*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes to you. Then you will be my witnesses*

*to testify about me in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

The Holy Spirit was sent to empower the disciples.

A number of years ago, my family and I took a trip to Charleston, South Carolina. It was one of those occasions when for whatever reason a fleet of old stately tall ships had docked in Charleston. What a magnificent sight! I took many photos. A tall ship as a symbol of the Christian church is one of my favorite illustrations. But what good would it be if a tall ship was carefully constructed ...if it was seaworthy ...if it had a trained crew ...if it was ready to set sail upon the ocean, but there was no wind to carry the ship to its destination? Without the wind, it wouldn't get very far.

What good does it do if we are created in the image of God ...if we are ready to serve God ...if we have even studied God's word and know our Christian doctrine ...if we as a group of trained disciples of Jesus Christ are poised to do things for God and go places with God ... ***if we do not have the wind, the breath, the power of God to propel us forward?*** That's the work of the Holy Spirit: to ***empower*** God's people.

Last Sunday I spoke about "The Spirit Within" ...within *you* and *me*. The Holy Spirit is there ...you know, within us ...from the moment we open ourselves to God's transforming and energizing love. And for United Methodists who with John Wesley believe so fervently in God's "prevenient grace," we must add that the Holy Spirit is there *even before* we respond to the claims of Christ upon our lives ...*even before* our Baptism ...*even before* our Profession of faith or Confirmation! The good news is that we do not have to ask the Holy Spirit into our lives.

Last week we were also reminded in our text from John's gospel how Jesus told the disciples that he would ask on their behalf for the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, to come and to be their Guide. Jesus asked for God's spirit to be sent to them, and then he told them to wait. The only people who were asked to wait for the Holy Spirit were the eleven disciples addressed by Jesus in our reading today from Acts chapter 1. You will recall *N.* reading these words: *Jesus ordered them (that is, the eleven disciples) not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father (that is, the Holy Spirit).* And he added: *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.* Since Pentecost no one has needed to

ask to receive the Holy Spirit. When we become Christians it is a package deal: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit ...God in all God's fullness is received by all who believe.

The main purpose of God's spirit within us is *to empower us to be an effective team of Christ's followers and witnesses in the world*. We are meant to be a team of witnesses, not individuals doing our own thing in isolation from one another. With the Holy Spirit within and the power of God's spirit freely available to us, we are more than just a community; we are participants in the ongoing life of the risen Christ.

The apostle, writing to the church in Corinth, describes Christians as the "Body of Christ" – a united, gifted, and empowered body representing its resurrected Lord in the world. One of the primary purposes of the Holy Spirit is to give gifts to each follower of Christ. The Corinthian church was told that Christ is the head of the body, but that the Holy Spirit gives each of us gifts to fit into the body. No one is overlooked in the gift-giving of the Holy Spirit. By bringing our gifts, and using them in concert with the gifts of others, the Body of Christ carries out the work and ministry of Christ in this world today. Feeding people, healing people, announcing the good news, befriending the friendless, demonstrating kingdom values, sharing time, treasure, and talents with others: all these things are only possible if we live in the Spirit, and express the gifts the Holy Spirit has given to each of us. God's spirit empowers us!

Sadly, the First Letter to the Corinthians had been written in response to ongoing disagreement, dissension, and even division in that church. Not surprisingly, the apostle went to great lengths to emphasize that the church as the Body of Christ – while there are many members in Christ's Body – is, and always will be, *one* body. There is a direct correlation between the empowerment of the church by the Holy Spirit and its unity. The Letter rebuked Christ's followers for allowing room for discouraging, demeaning, diminishing attitudes or behavior towards one another. They were reminded that every member is joined together by God's spirit with all other members so as to create a powerful witness as they proclaim and present the risen Jesus to the world.

Please listen to this: The Body of Christ is *disempowered* and *decreases* in its witness to the world when the unity of the body is in any way damaged or impaired. This may occur

when one part or member of the body says to another part, “I have no need of you,” or, “Because you are a lesser part, you are unimportant, or of less value to the body as a whole.” When that begins to happen in a church there is a loss of spiritual power and effectiveness. We are *all* called, gifted, and empowered by the Holy Spirit to participate in the one Body of Christ. Nothing could be truer and more relevant in our church during this last week of our Stewardship Campaign as we pray about filling out our Estimate of Giving cards to bring with us to place before the altar.

May God’s spirit convince each one of us to participate as fully as possible in this spiritual discipline of the stewardship of our financial resources. May God’s spirit empower us to give as generously as possible whether that means pledging \$10, or \$100, or \$1,000 per month, or more. No matter how small the gift may be, it is needed, it is valued, and it will help to empower us as the Body of Christ to bear witness to Christ in and beyond Thomasville, and thereby advance God’s kingdom.

Let me close with a personal story that I believe illustrates the importance of encouraging *every* part of the Body of Christ ... 1. To participate, and 2. To be recognized by *all* other members. When we do this we will observe how the Holy Spirit is present to equip and to empower *each* and *every* person in this church for ministry and mission in the world.

The setting for this true story is East London in South Africa where both Carol and I grew up. Although we did not know each other at the time, we were both members of our neighborhood church, Nahoon Methodist Church. I was 11 years old and had been taking piano lessons for 2 years when I was approached by the minister of our church, Ernie Drewett, to play the organ for both morning and evening Sunday services. Because I had no experience playing the organ and was so young, I was not a little alarmed to be asked and very hesitant. In spite of protests about my inadequacy for the task, I was urged to agree because they were desperate. There just seemed to be no one at that time to play for the services. Believing that my efforts would be better than nothing, and with a sense of the need to give back to God a small offering for God’s many blessings in my life, I began what turned out to be quite a long, enriching journey into a love for and appreciation of sacred classical music.

Needless to say, the organ music in those first services must have been quite painful for the congregation to endure! The hymns were played ever so slowly as I struggled with the music that was initially very difficult to read and play. But both pastor and congregation were long-suffering people! They put up with me as I slowly made progress and grew in self-confidence. After a couple of years, they did a magnificent thing: they gave me a scholarship to take organ lessons with Mr. Tom Marnitz who was a most accomplished organist at the prestigious uptown Trinity Methodist Church. From age thirteen to age seventeen I took the bus every week to Oxford Street and learned how to play the organ ...took Royal School of Church Music exams ...and progressed to a point where I was accomplished enough in my senior year of high school to be appointed deputy organist of Trinity Methodist Church. Although this meant I would have to leave my home church, I received all the encouragement I needed from that congregation to take the more responsible position at Trinity. In the meantime I had begun to equip another young lady, Felicity Joseph, to replace me as organist at Nahoon. So they were not left stranded.

To cut a long story short, Tom Marnitz died quite suddenly and for two years in my eighteenth and nineteenth years of life I became the resident organist of Trinity Methodist Church. I played for all the services, accompanied the choirs, and provided music for all the weddings and funerals at Trinity. Without the encouragement of the members of the Body of Christ none of this would have been possible. Instead of saying, "We have no need for you," the people of Nahoon Methodist Church were used by God's spirit to empower me – to discover, develop and use my God-given music talent – to become quite a good organist at that time! And, I might add, it was during those years of learning to play and love sacred music that I felt God's call to the ordained ministry. With hindsight I am able to see a clear connection between my calling to a music ministry and to the ordained ministry. To this day music plays a very important part in my spiritual life and passion for ministry.

From what I have personally observed and also learned from others of you who have been here longer than me, in similar way Memorial Church has encouraged people of all ages and stations in life to explore full-time ministry. In most recent times the names of David Hiatt and Todd McCullough come to mind, and in earlier days not least our own Peggy

Finch. My point is that the encouragement and empowerment given to individuals in the past must continue in the present and into the future. This recognition and support needs to be expressed to *all* members of the Body of Christ. I cannot say that too often!

Will you celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit by which the Church is empowered in this and every age to bear witness to Jesus Christ and to live together in Christian community? Will you? If you have not already done this, will you acknowledge that God's spirit is within you to empower you to share in Christ's work in the world? I challenge all of us to pray everyday, "Holy Spirit, fall afresh on us!"

But I better caution us that the Holy Spirit does not give us everything we want. On the contrary, the Spirit demands everything we have. God's spirit does not help us escape from a broken world; instead the Holy Spirit sends us into the world as agents of Christ's reconciling love. God's spirit does not always save us from our weakness; instead the Holy Spirit empowers us in our weakness to help and comfort one another. God's spirit does not protect us from all suffering; instead the Holy Spirit assures us that even in our suffering, God is "at work for good with those who love him, who are called according to God's purpose." And most of all, God's spirit does not just give us gifts for our personal advantage; instead the Holy Spirit equips us with gifts to pursue what the apostle calls the "more excellent way" of love: the way that builds up the common good, and bind us to Jesus Christ and to one another with cords that can never be broken, as we share in the eternal fellowship of the Holy Spirit. And so we dare to pray: "Holy Spirit, fall afresh on *us!*"

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.