

May 15, 2005 Pentecost Sunday  
Acts 2:1-21

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
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I learned something interesting as I was studying for this sermon. Pentecost is not original to Christianity. Rather, it started as one of the top three holidays of the Jewish year, an agricultural festival that falls fifty days after the Passover. And in the times of the books of Acts, it was an occasion for Jews from throughout the region to gather together to celebrate in Jerusalem. The Pentecost celebration that we mark as the day of birth of the Christian Church, has as its beginning that same festival. For Christians, Pentecost falls fifty days after Easter.

At Pentecost, the Bible tells us the Holy Spirit came upon the people and appeared as tongues of fire on their heads. As they were filled with the Holy Spirit, the people began to speak in tongues and though they spoke in their native languages, each understood the others despite having never heard the other languages before. In her book “Girl Meets God”, Lauren Winner describes that first Pentecost. “The Spirit is what Elijah the Prophet calls the still small voice of God. But not always still and small. At Pentecost, the Spirit comes in tongues of fire to the disciples; and the Spirit is what will cause, in the prophet Joel’s famous phrase, “Your sons and daughters to prophesy, your old people to dream dreams and your young people to see visions.” (232) And indeed, her’s is an apt description—they did prophesy, speak in tongues and dream dreams. It was a big event. And perhaps it was the impressive ways in which the Spirit choose to present itself that persuaded 3000 people to join the church that day. Surely they knew that something pretty incredible was going on and they felt moved to become a part of it. Indeed, on the first Pentecost, the Spirit was not the still, small voice of God but rather it was loud and roaringly obvious, leaving an indelible mark on everyone who experienced it.

In my experience, both personally and as a pastor, God’s voice is rarely, if ever, loud and roaringly obvious. In my life, it seems that God has perfected the still, small voice. Only once, when I was fifteen and experienced a call to ordained ministry, was the message crystal clear. On all other occasions, I’ve contemplated, doubted, hoped for, and feared that still, small voice of God. I’ve wondered if I’m really doing God’s will. I’ve worried that I’m not getting it right. And I’ve wandered around hoping for some sign and perceiving nothing.

And I’m not alone. I don’t meet many people who have a definitive sense of what God wants from them, what God needs from them, and what it is that God is prompting them to do. A friend of mine has been waiting months for a “sign” from God. She’s growing ever more weary as the days go by and she still doesn’t FEEL anything. She wants to believe, she really does. What she wouldn’t do for the spirit to descend on her like a tongue of fire. She wonders if it’s really so much to ask of God—just to reveal God’s self to her a little bit, so that she knows that God is real. She’s ready to make a commitment to the church. She’s ready to take her kids to Sunday School. She’s ready to be a disciple. And all she needs before she’ll turn over her life to Christ is a little confirmation of the living God. And I’m guessing, that even now as I’m preaching this, she’s sitting at home with her three little girls playing in the living room and her Grey Hound sleeping on the couch, hoping and praying that perhaps today will be the day that the still, small voice makes itself heard in her life.

Do you know how she feels? I certainly do. We seek to know God as we try to make sense of the world and our place in it. We wonder about God's intention for us. We ask, "Why did I survive cancer and he didn't?" "Why do I have all of this money and they don't?" "Why do they have all that money and I don't?" "Why did I have to go through such a terrible ordeal?" "Why did God let that happen to me?" "Why did God spare me from having that happen?" We ask the questions not so much because we want to know the specifics about a situation, but rather because we are trying so hard to get to know God. We really want to hear the still, small voice. We really want it all to be as obvious as it was for the 3000 new church members on the first Pentecost.

And yet, many of us rarely, if ever, feel the Spirit of God in such obvious ways. Indeed, we sometimes wonder if there is really a God at all. But, there's something compelling and enduring about this God that we sometimes doubt, after all, we're all here this morning, aren't we. Sure, some of us may have come out of a sense of duty or habit. But no matter, because we all come with the conscious, or sometimes unconscious thought, that maybe today will be the day. Maybe today is the day when we'll feel the Spirit of God descend upon us just as surely as it did those first believers. We want to feel like the first converts to the church—we want to be sure that what we're doing is God's will for us and we want to feel it in every hair on our heads and every nail on our toes.

And so what are we to do? How can we convince God to make us feel like the first converts felt—so certain and compelled. How can we be as assured as they were that the Spirit of God was upon them. Well, I don't know that we ever can be absolutely sure. The knowledge of God and feeling the presence of the Holy Spirit don't usually hit us like a bolt of lightening. It's usually more subtle—it's that still, small voice rather than the loud, roaringly obvious one. It's something that's hard to explain and understand. It's not as obvious as it was on the first Pentecost. But that's okay. After all, in the words of Garrison Keillor, "It's supposed to be difficult to explain or understand, otherwise it wouldn't be faith."

And I don't know that understanding and explaining is the point. It's the experience of faith, the just showing up part of it, that matters. As you know, the children are joining us for the first time at the communion table. They are a prime example of "showing up" and just being present so that the Spirit can do some work in them. In some churches I've served, there are adults who don't approve of children participating in communion. They say that children can't really appreciate it or understand it and so they shouldn't be participating in it. Well, if that were the case, I shouldn't be here either. I have a basic understanding and I know the history of the tradition, but this meal is, at its core, a mystery. What I know about it is that somehow, in some way, the Spirit does descend upon us during this holy meal. And I think children can sense that presence and mystery just as surely as any adult. And even if they can't, there is value in just being present, just showing up because faith is caught, not taught.

A good start to any life of faith is just showing up. And that's where I think my friend has it a little backwards. Instead of coming to church in the midst of her doubts, instead of being with a community of believers, instead of praying the prayers and singing the songs and listening to the sermons in an attempt to hear the still small voice; she is waiting for the voice and then she will

begin to engage, then she will start showing up. I think she needs to turn it around—to start living a life of faith in hopes that faith will come to her—not the other way around.

When we show up for God, when we do the stuff that a person of faith does, we engage in spiritual disciplines. Attending church is one of those disciplines, so is praying, and studying the Bible, giving offerings, and serving others. Sometimes we may have revelations and really feel the Spirit descending on us when we do these things. Other times it might just feel like we're going through the motions. Either way, a life of faith is made up of these spiritual disciplines, whether we're really feeling them or not.

Yes, they had it easy, those first 3000 converts. The Spirit was pretty obvious to them, they really felt it. But just because it's not so obvious to us, doesn't mean that it isn't there. Again, the words of Lauren Winner, the author of *Girl Meets God*, lend us some insight.

In the Gospel, we see that the Spirit will be with us forever, will guide us in all truth, will teach us, and will take what is Christ's and make it ours. In church history, the Spirit helps us formulate creeds, helps us interpret Scripture, helps us make decisions. In our own humble houses, the Spirit helps us to pray. The Spirit helps us know what to say when we open our mouths. The Spirit is the reason we Christians can do anything, the reason we do not live paralyzed in fear of messing up. The Spirit is how we unfold God's will this side of eternity. The Spirit is the reason we can build a church and have confidence that we will get it at least a little bit right. (232)

Yes, that's it—that sounds more familiar, that's the Spirit we know. It's the Spirit that is behind the kind words of a friend. It's the Spirit that inspires folks to show up for work days, committee meetings, and to visit with someone who is sick or grieving. It's the Spirit that enters a person's heart and convinces him or her to make a generous offering when the plate gets passed. It's the Spirit that gets up out of bed every Sunday morning so that we can be here by 10 for church. Surely the Spirit is just as active now as it was at the first Pentecost, it's just that it's a bit more subtle.

And today we're going to celebrate that subtle Spirit of God as we gather around this communion table. We hope that we will know Christ in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup. We pray that we will recognize Christ because the Spirit is here with us, inspiring us, uniting us, and descending upon our hearts. And that's why we're here, on this Sunday and all Sundays—not because we know it all or can explain the great mysteries of the faith. Rather, we're here because we know that's there's something more, much more, to this life than meets the eye and we believe that it is God and we want to know that God, to love that God, and to feel the presence of that God. That's why we show up, week after week, month after month, year after year—with the confidence that we're getting it at least a little bit right and knowing that even if the roaringly obvious voice of God is silent, that the still small voice of God continues to speak to us and that the Spirit of God does descend upon us, filling us with love and inspiring us, whether we realize it or not.