

**The Day of Pentecost (a)**  
**Acts 2:1-21    John 20:19-23**  
**St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH**  
**May 31, 2020 (Online Only, Quarantine)**

I read a real-life story written by a pastor whose first call was to an urban congregation in Iowa. This church was more than 100 years old, and it had at one time, in the 50's, been very big—more than 2000 members. But recently they hadn't been able to get people excited about anything that was going on in the church.

The people that did come to worship were great friends. They were supportive and loving towards each other. But there were signs of decline all around them. The church rolls said there were 700 baptized members, but on Sundays only about 10 kids were showing up for Sunday School. Their stewardship giving had been going down steadily for 10 years. Attendance at worship was in decline. The pastor was visiting over thirty homebound people every month. In his first year there, he did 27 funerals and no baptisms.

The new pastor saw right away that they needed to start doing things to get those 700 people engaged. He had a church council of wonderful, faithful Christians working with him. And they had no shortage of ideas. They got excited and made a calendar of events for the coming year that they thought their members might find attractive: bible studies, picnics, fun-nights, mission and outreach activities in the community. Something for everyone. They publicized all these activities all over the place. The whole council was involved. They made tons of phone calls, and sent invitations.

At the end of the year this young pastor found himself so depressed that he was barely able to drag himself to the office in the morning, because the result of all this effort and organization was nothing. The same 20 people had attended all those activities. His council members and lay leaders were extremely disheartened. The pastor had to fight off bitterness. He kept praying to God, "show me what to do!" "How can I get people excited if I myself am starting to feel so pessimistic about everything? I'm basically down to begging now."

One night after he got home from a funeral visitation, he got a phone call from one of his two remaining Sunday School teachers. This was a young woman who had just moved to town with her young family. They were the only new members he had received at that church so far. She told the pastor she had an idea. Something strange about giving water away. The pastor was tired and preoccupied. He just asked her what it was going to cost, because that was his first concern in those days. She said nothing—she was going to spring for it. And then she asked when she could come to the council and present her idea. The pastor thought to himself, "great, another idea for council. You don't want to know how many ideas we've had in the last year." But he told her out loud—"just go ahead and do it...that's great." After they hung up he forgot about the call.

A couple of weeks later, on his way out of Wal-Mart, he noticed a crowd of people off to one side on the sidewalk. As he walked by, one of his church youths suddenly appeared at his side and said "Hey pastor, you want a bottle of water?" Confused, he took the bottle. On it was a label that read "This is the day that the Lord has made—rejoice and be glad in it. A gift from your friends at Trinity Presbyterian Church." He looked around—and there at a table sat this young woman who had called him. Most of the Sunday school kids were there. That summer had been scorching hot. There were at least 10-15 people standing around talking casually, drinking water. Practically everyone who walked by took a bottle and thanked them. And as he stood there talking to his Sunday school teacher and the kids about what they were doing there that day and why, he thought to himself "this is the best drink of water I've ever had in my life." He was almost in tears, he was so thankful for this.

The thing is, ever since that day, this pastor regarded that single small Sunday school project as the turning point for the congregation. Within two years, with that young woman's leadership, dozens of new children were coming regularly to Sunday School; new families came in. And the church was becoming more and more vibrant and active. It was not that everything they'd done that disappointing first year was a bad idea. In fact, all those ideas and that groundwork they had laid were reaping benefits as the congregation came alive again. As this pastor put it in this article he wrote: they'd stopped begging. They had stopped dwelling on what they did not have. The most important thing was, more and more of them were becoming bold, like that young woman, willing to take risks out beyond the church walls. That small activity of giving water in the parking lot was the first step they took towards intentionally taking the gospel out to the world around them. Everything fell into place when just a few people shifted from having their spiritual needs met to letting the Spirit go out from them. It started with just two or three people, but had a domino effect.

That's a Pentecost story. First of all, the Holy Spirit blows where he wills. You cannot force the Holy Spirit into your own life or into the people around you. Like the pastor and his council found, you can't come up with a formula which brings you to a spiritual revival. But one thing that you can do, is lay a foundation for the Holy Spirit to work with. Never stop working, never stop trying to reach out to people. Another thing...make sure you're not standing in the Holy Spirit's way. The pastor said that the moment he stepped back and gave permission to that Sunday school teacher to respond to God's work in her heart—that was when the Holy Spirit blew into that congregation through the side door. The pastor admitted that in those early years he was extremely self-protective and worried about his own image all the time. So he tried to control everything. And he finally realized that, as much as he had felt like he was giving his life for these unresponsive people, it really had been, in large part, about his ego. And in the end, God surprised him and humbled him. The Holy Spirit was suddenly there telling him "get out of the way. Take this refreshing drink of water and rejoice and be glad." That goes for all of us. Whenever our Christianity becomes a way just to bolster ourselves, make ourselves feel more pure, more right, more secure, more happy, whenever our faith is just about blowing up that balloon of self, we just get in the way of God's Church. Being critical of others and measuring ourselves against other people becomes more important than being faithful to God.

Remember that about the power of the Holy Spirit. Encourage the people around you, your children, your friends at church, to use their freedom to act out of their Christian faith. **Expect** the Holy Spirit to work in surprising ways; let him come in through the side doors. And show your freedom, your joy, your love in Christ. Don't wait. Listen to what God is telling you, study his word, pray, think about how he wants you to use your gifts, your creativity, your energy, in service to his word.

God loves it when we're bold. And the Holy Spirit doesn't care about who's on the membership rolls of a church. He's always reaching out, bringing people together, bringing life and growth. He's never playing maintenance. He's a confident, bold, generous giver. That's what the woman was teaching her Sunday school class that day in the Walmart parking lot. We know very well how today's world tries to make us hide our faith in Christ. The Spirit works through us to get the good word of God's salvation out to the world. Even just standing in a parking lot handing out free water conveys that life-giving power. And yes, living by the Spirit means you're going to set yourself up for rejection. When you give yourself out, people might refuse the free gift you offer. But we know who wins the final battle, for everyone.

During the season of Easter...the last seven weeks...we talked about that resurrection power of God in Christ, that breaks our tombs open and sets us free from the things that hold us down in life. Now at Pentecost, it's the next step: we see the future open up in front of us, where we follow that resurrection power out into the world, and become agents of God's promise to the people around us. Where we say "yes" to all that God has done for us, and then confidently, boldly, start giving it all away.