

Pentecost Sunday May 27, 2012  
The National Presbyterian Church

## Fruitless or Fruitful?

Isaiah 5:1-7; John 15:1; Acts 2:1-8, 14-21

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In John 15:1, Jesus is speaking to his disciples on the night when he is going to be betrayed and arrested, and he wants them to know about his plans and his purposes for them in the days ahead. And so he says to them *"I am the true vine and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. He prunes every branch that bears fruit to make it bear more fruit"* – saying, in effect, to his disciples that their lives are like branches that need to continue to be attached to his life and when they are his fruit will be seen in them. And then he adds at Verse 16, *"You did not choose me but I chose you and I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last."*

Fifty days ago today we celebrated the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday, a glorious Easter Sunday. And then last Sunday, Ascension Sunday, Quinn Fox's sermon celebrated God's affirmation of Jesus' authority, his risen authority over the whole creation as our Lord, as our King and as our Savior. Quinn spoke about the Ascension of Jesus, not only in terms of Jesus literally ascending to the sky, so that we no longer see him in flesh and blood on earth, but he spoke of the Ascension in terms of its theological significance – Jesus ascending in the same way as a king or a queen ascends the throne and is crowned king or queen, and has authority over all the lands that they rule. So Jesus' Ascension is not just about the absence of his visible presence, but about his authority, given to him by God, over everything in Heaven and on Earth and over your life and my life.

So we've been thinking together about Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension. And then today we come to think about another great moment in the life of the early church. We come to think about the day of Pentecost. Fifty days after Easter, ten days after the Ascension, when the Church celebrates the gift of God's Holy Spirit to the followers of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus leaves his followers in flesh and blood at the Ascension. And then on Pentecost he returns in Spirit. He returns to be with his followers, his disciples from that moment on and forever more.

I want this morning to speak about the Holy Spirit and that Pentecostal experience.

For many people, and especially for us who are born and bred Presbyterians, too much talk about the Holy Spirit can scare us to death. We

hear people ranting and raving on the television and they say that their experience flows from the presence of the Holy Spirit and we shudder! We don't want what they have!

Or we hear people speaking about certain parts of the Bible, saying that if you have the Spirit then you'll know it because of specific experiences or manifestations that the Holy Spirit always creates. More often than not they will turn to a passage of scripture like the passage we read from the second Chapter of Acts about the day of Pentecost, and they will say, "Here's the paradigm, here's the example, here's the proof of the presence of the Spirit of God," and they'll tell us the story that we just heard in which Jesus' followers are gathered together in Jerusalem.

They've seen Jesus alive but they're still not quite sure what's going to happen next, so they are praying to God for God's help within their lives, and all of a sudden there is a sound. It's like the sound of a mighty wind. And they look at each other and something strange is happening on top of everybody's head. There appear to be flames that are dancing all around. And they suddenly find that their mouths are moving, speaking a language that they never learned in school.

And the Bible says that all of this comes because of the Holy Spirit. It's rather like a multimedia presentation that God puts on. MTV, something like that. A big show with a great crowd and it gets everybody's attention and while everybody's head is turned, Simon Peter, Jesus' closest friend – the one who let him down, who said that he did not know Jesus when Jesus was arrested because he was scared out of his mind – Simon Peter uses the occasion to preach to this crowd which is turning around to see what is happening.

And Peter begins to preach. He speaks about Jesus' life, his death and his resurrection. And huge numbers of people actually listen to him. And in a few moments the fledgling church of maybe 200 members expands and grows and becomes a vibrant community of over 3,000 believers.

And as Peter speaks, he promises that the same Holy Spirit who came as the wind and as the tongues of fire, the same Holy Spirit who caused those mouths to move, to speak languages that they have never learned, this same Holy Spirit will be in their lives too, from this moment on. You can expect this! A great promise, a remarkable promise, a wonderful promise not only for those who were there at that time but for you and me who are followers of Jesus Christ to this day.

A marvelous promise except for one thing and that is this,

- that most of us if not all of us and there may be six sections out there, most of us here today have never experienced that kind of wind that blew out of nowhere and got our attention.
- And most of us have never experienced turning to our neighbors, you can turn to them right now and God can prove me wrong, but our neighbors, our fellow Christians having bouncing on the top of their heads flames, tongues of fire.

- And most of us have never experienced, I wish at times when I was taking an exam I had, languages that we had never learned in school suddenly coming out of our mouths so that we can speak them with no training whatsoever.

Now some of us might have (let me not be too glib on this), some of us might have... but most of us have not. And there are many of us, especially those born and bred Presbyterians who would say "I really don't want that kind of thing anyway!"

So where does that leave us? That is, if we haven't had the experiences in Acts 2, and if we don't exactly want them, where does that leave us? Doesn't our experience, or lack of experiences, leave us with a critical question?

Can we say for sure that you and I today, 2000 years later, have actually experienced the same Holy Spirit as they experienced on that first day of Pentecost?

Or to put it another way, if we had never known the wind or the fire or the languages, as they did on that first day of Pentecost,

how do we know that God's Spirit, God's Holy Spirit, the ongoing presence of Jesus Christ has been given to us too, as Jesus and Peter and the scriptures have promised?

Well that's the question I'd like us to pursue, to think about today. What's the evidence? So this is not just cerebral, this is about experience.

What is the evidence experientially that you and I need to have in order to be sure that the same Holy Spirit lives and moves and works in us today as those disciples experienced when the Church was established on that first Pentecost long ago.

**What's the evidence of a Spirit's presence?** Well as we think about that question I'd like to begin by clearing the clutter which comes from that first day, from the day of Pentecost. Right from the start what I want to say is this, lest you misinterpret or misunderstand me, that God the creator, the God who made the quirks and the quarks and the black holes and goodness knows what else that is out there, which is so mysterious it's almost incredible, *God could do whatever God wants to do to show that he is present.* Nobody, as C.S. Lewis said in his books on Narnia thinking of Jesus in terms of the Lion, Aslan, nobody can tame God. We can't bring God under our control. God can do whatever God wants to to manifest his presence. And I am sure, I am convinced in fact, that from time to time God does at pivotal moments in history like Easter, like the Ascension, like Pentecost, I believe that God pulls out all the stops, draws on all the bells and whistles, and on all the fireworks to display his presence and his glory – putting on a convincing show.

But having said that, having said that God can and that God does, as I read through the pages of scripture and read the story of the early Christian church, what I see is this. That *it is not just the miraculous that confirms the Spirit's presence, but the ordinary as well.* Not just the miraculous but the ordinary as well. So that alongside the spectacular, alongside the fireworks, there's also the expectation among the early Christians that the Spirit's work has to do with the

everyday and with the mundane as well as the supernatural. And in particular the Spirit's work has to do with a transformation and the growth and the effectiveness of your life and my life, both as individuals and as a community together, called to be the body of Christ, in the service of Christ Jesus. And when we see that happening we know it's the same Spirit at work who transformed the life of Peter the coward into Peter the courageous preacher and created the Church on that first day of Pentecost.

Read the scriptures and you will see two words which describe the ongoing – sometimes spectacular but frequently normal – work of the Holy Spirit. Two words that I'd like to explore. One is the word **gift** and the other is the word **fruit** – the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit. Sometimes spectacular but frequently ordinary.

**Gifts of the Spirit**. Let's begin by thinking about the gifts of the Spirit. The gifts of the Spirit are about *the skills and the abilities that God gives* to the followers of Jesus, to every single follower of Jesus. That means all of us here today have been gifted in order to help the church grow to become more like Jesus Christ; so that even if we do not see him in the flesh, people will see the church and through the church, incredibly, see Jesus. That's his passion: that through us as the body of Christ together the world will see him. And he gives to us, each of us, gifts which when we use them for his sake and for his glory he will take and use so that others will see Christ, not only in me or you individually, but in us together.

There are lists of Spiritual gifts in the pages of scripture (particularly 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12 and Romans 12). These lists are not meant to be complete. If the apostle Paul who wrote about them lived today I believe he would add other gifts onto that list. But what I want to point out in particular is that *those lists are a combination of the extraordinary and the ordinary*, the spectacular and the simple. And they are side-by-side in those lists. So that side-by-side with the extraordinary manifestations of God's Spirit that God can do at any time (miracles, tongues, etc.) God wants you to have ordinary gifts.

- For example think of the gift of teaching. Gifts that people have used today in our church in Sunday school. Some teachers are spectacular. Some are just ordinary willing folks who have learned something from Jesus Christ and they want to pass it on. And through them God communicates his gospel to others whether they are spectacular teachers or not. Whether the gift is 'innate' or 'given out of the blue' is irrelevant! What matters is that God takes and uses, blesses and makes fruitful, those gifts.
- Or the gift of leadership. People who are willing to share their time and their energy to serve God in the church and beyond the church as disciples of Jesus Christ. God knows that our world needs Christian leaders in every area of life. And God may have given you that gift that doesn't look too different from gifts other people have, but when we offer those gifts to God

in God's service, God empowers them so that His name is manifested in the world.

- Or the gift of Assistance, or Helps. This is a gift that I like in particular because it really brings the spectacular down to earth in the ordinary: the gift of assistance, or as older translations would put it, the gift of helps – the Spiritual gift of helps.

I've seen that gift in every church I've been in, and I think you have seen it too. In every congregation there are a handful of people who just show up at the right time and the right place. And they say what can I do? And there are ordinary things to be done without which the church won't work, or any community won't work. Some of those folks set up things that some take down. Some stuff envelopes, some lick stamps. Some check bank statements, some provide cookies in Stone Hall after this service.

So some people may preach, some may teach, some may do miraculous healings. But frequently, frequently the gifts are ordinary that God uses. And among the gift of helps that I've seen which has impressed me most is the gift of what I would call phoning: the spiritual gift of phoning.

Now Paul doesn't write about this because there weren't any phones in those days. But if there were phones I believe he would have written about this gift. I saw this ordinary gift in practice in one congregation in a way that for me was so extraordinary that I have not been able to forget it.

A series of programs was taking place which I thought people should be attending, but they weren't. People just weren't turning up, at least at first. But then things changed. All of a sudden people began to come, with no apparent explanation. The elder in charge of the events was Nelson. Nelson was low-keyed, and laid-back, not type-A type, just doing his work as a faithful friend of Jesus Christ. He had just begun his term as an elder and the growth in the programs occurred in this time of transition. So I asked him, "Nelson what are you doing?" And he said "Well I just call up people, talk a little bit, ask them if they'll come, if they'll participate, if they'll help, and they say "Yes." He thought it was very ordinary. But what I knew, that he didn't know, was that the previous elder who was a wonderful person, a real go-getter, the kind of person I'd say "this person is going to make a great elder," had confided in me that he had made exactly those same phone calls and nobody had turned up. Nobody had turned up. They didn't say "yes" to him but they said "yes" to Nelson!

And that is a gift. A gift that God used, through this quiet, unassuming man: God building up the church. Nothing spectacular, very ordinary, but enormously powerful and quite extraordinary!

And when the Spirit is at work the Spirit will cause us to ask this basic question (and every single one of us should ask it) when the Spirit is at work: WHAT IS

MY GIFT? And if you can't see it yourself, ask somebody else! The Spirit will drive you to ask the question because God by the Spirit has given every one of us a gift to use for his glory, and the Spirit will then impel us, drive us, draw us to use it for the sake of God and the glory of Jesus Christ.

**Now that is an experience which every single one of us should have as we seek to understand the place and the role of the same Holy Spirit to appear in Pentecost in our lives today.** The Spirit gives us gifts by which the church is formed as the church was formed and created on that first day of Pentecost. So that's part of the evidence for the Holy Spirit – extraordinary, spectacular, simple and ordinary. A gift for every one of us. That's the first word, gift.

**The Fruit of the Spirit.** The second word is "fruit." The fruit of the Spirit. When the Spirit is at work, the Spirit produces fruit within our lives as individuals and within our community as the church, as the body of Jesus Christ, fruit that becomes apparent to all kinds of people; even though at times it may not be apparent to us individually it does become apparent to others.

The Apostle Paul speaks about the fruit of the Spirit explicitly as he writes to a church in what is now central Turkey, in a region called Galatia around 20 years after the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus. In Galatians Chapter 5 from the Verse 22 he says "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." The Apostle says "there's no law against this," as if to say, "Sometimes we think of Christianity as 'don't do this, don't do that, don't do the next thing.' But here the Apostle Paul is saying that Christianity is really the opposite. It's about God by the Spirit producing a life within us that nothing can stop, against which there is no law, a life that can expand and grow forever and ever.

And when the Spirit is at work, this is what we will see in our lives as individuals and together as a community. Though sometimes, and this is critical to know, we won't see it in ourselves first, and we may not even feel it. But God is at work whether we see it or feel it or not.

Let me give you an example of this, a powerful example which has impacted my life over the years and to which I return repeatedly. Let me ask you to think about the growth of the church in China. Many of you are aware but many of you may not be aware that the Christian Church has grown by leaps and bounds in China. Tens of millions of people are turning to Jesus Christ. And within a few years China will, if this continues, be the most active Christian nation on the face of the earth. There's no question about that. Thus this is happening before our eyes today, and as it happens you can trace the origins of this back to the missionary movement in the 1800s, and to one man in particular whose name is James Hudson Taylor, who established what was called the China Inland Mission.

One of James Hudson Taylor's missionaries was a man called Dixon Host ("D.E." Host), and he spoke about Hudson Taylor like this. He said,

I shall never forget the impression made upon me by Hudson Taylor in connection with many difficulties. Again and again he was obliged either to greatly modify or lay aside projects which were sound and helpful but met with determined opposition and so tended to create greater evils than those which might have been removed or mitigated by the changes in question. Later on in answer to patient continuance in prayer many such projects were given effect to.

Laying aside projects which you have thought of and which are really good. Is that easy? Fun? Joyful? No! These were tough moments. No doubt at all that Hudson Taylor probably didn't feel very spiritual or patient or generous at those times.

Is it easy to deal with people who express "determined opposition" to your projects, and to work things through until you realize that if implemented too quickly they will create "greater evils than those which might have been removed or mitigated by the changes in question." He knew that his way was right. He knew that it was best. But he backed off!

And then these words: "Later on in answer to patient continuance in prayer many such projects were given effect to." *Fruit was born!* He never really saw it. He saw some of it. But, oh my, the fruit of what he did then, because of the patience that he probably never felt, because of his love for his fellow missionaries and the Chinese people, because of his faithfulness to Jesus Christ, his kindness to those who opposed him, his self control at those moments, is now simply spectacular.

Through the ordinary it became spectacular and is to this day an incredible phenomenon for which we should be praying and of which we should be aware. The Spirit at work. Powerfully, effectively, through the ordinary beyond our knowing.

**How do we Obtain the Gifts and Fruit?** And how in Hudson Taylor's case was this happening? Because he cried out to be more Spiritual? Maybe he did. But I don't think that was the reason. This fruit of the Spirit appeared in his life because his passion above everything else was to *stay connected to Jesus Christ* – to stay connected to Jesus Christ. This was his work: to stay in touch with Christ so that Christ would do his work through him. So that Christ's life would flow through him like sap through a vine. The work of the Spirit flowing into him and out of him into others. It is by cultivating a relationship with Jesus Christ that the Holy Spirit works in us through gifts and fruit for the blessing of the Church and the transformation of the world.

The most powerful passages of scripture which speak about this fruit that I know of in scripture are in the book of the prophet Isaiah (5:1-7), and John 15. As I close this morning let's look briefly at John 15 – a critical passage, as Jesus speaks, before his crucifixion, about his imminent departure from them. He knows he's going away in flesh and blood, but he tells them, even as he leaves them that he desperately wants their lives, every single one of them, to be fruitful.

*I am the true vine he says. My father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. He prunes every branch that bears fruit to make it bear more fruit.*

Here's the staggering thing: that you and I are these branches. We didn't make ourselves branches. Jesus brought us into fellowship with himself by his life, his death and his resurrection so that our lives are attached to his, and his life (like sap), the life of the Holy Spirit, can flow through us if we stay attached.

*You've already been cleansed by word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me.*

That is, live in me as you would live with others in your household, so that my life may impact your life as you impact those in your household. Whether they want to or not, our children (and this is part of baptism) are influenced by us because they live in our household.

*If you abide in me and my words abide in you ask for whatever you wish. We won't ask for the outrageous if we abide with him. We'll actually ask for his life to keep flowing through us and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this that you bear much fruit, much fruit and become my disciples. I've said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. You did not choose me but I chose you.*

You did not choose me – but oh yes, we did; but above that – I chose you for a purpose that you should go and bear fruit. I appointed you for this and that your fruit would last.

Isn't this what you want for your life? To live a fruitful life for God?

- Christ called us, appointed us to live fruitful lives for him and he equips us with every gift we need to be fruitful in his service. And when the Spirit is present this is what we see, this is what others see in our lives and perhaps more miraculously, in the church which becomes by the power of the Spirit, the visible body of Christ.
- And when we cultivate that relationship with Christ we find ourselves laying aside the arid fruitlessness of self-empowered religiosity where we are trying to be religious in our own strength! We lay it aside and God comes and flows through us so that our lives and the Church are transformed.

And that really is the evidence of Pentecost. And it's more powerful to this world than "wind and flames and tongues," though if God wants to do that, that is fine. But when the world sees our ordinary lives transformed, and the Church transformed, I'll tell you, in today's society which thinks very little of the Church, that will turn heads, and God, by the Spirit, will be known as the source. Indeed on Pentecost wasn't that actually the point?

- The transformation of Peter from coward to courageous preacher? How stunning is that?
- And those 12 disciples transformed into a community which would soon turn the world upside down?

So may God be known to us by the Spirit this day and we be known to the world as His followers.