

The Breath of Life

Dr. Tom Pace

May 31, 2020

Acts 2:1-4; 42-47

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Acts 2:1-4 (NRSV)

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers, Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 2:42-47 (NRSV)

Let's pray together. O God open us up, open our eyes that we might see, open our ears that we might hear whatever it is that you have for us today. For each one of us, especially for us as a community of faith. We pray, God, that you would open up our hearts that we might feel, that you can pull away the calluses. And then O God, in response, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.

A number of years ago, my wife Dee and I took a CPR class. We wanted to learn how to do Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation. We had someone come to our home and teach us, and they brought that little CPR dummy that they use. I don't know if you've ever seen that. It's just a human figure from the torso on up, and you have to learn how to do the compressions right at the place by the sternum, and then you learn to breathe into the mouth of that plastic doll, and you do it until you can see the chest rise and fall. That way, you know you're breathing correctly. It's not as easy as it looks; I have to tell you.

I don't know if you've ever seen that in the movies but there when someone has been swimming and almost drowns, they bring them up. Then they're sort of lifeless on the beach and the lifeguard or someone administers mouth to mouth and suddenly, the person blows out a lot of water, they cough and then they sputter and get back up. It is the coolest picture to see them come back to life.

That's the image that I want you to hold in your mind of this lifeless, almost dead body that's there then is breathed into the breath of life.

You see, the early church was not really the living body of Christ. At the beginning of Acts 2, we see this church that's just hunkered down, hiding away. They're praying, but they're hiding in their room. Then on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit comes, and it brings them to life again. And they're transformed, everything's changed. It's like they become the living body of Christ.

Now the word in both Hebrew and Greek for spirit, the word that's used for Holy Spirit is the word that can mean wind or breath. It is *ruah* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek. And it has to do with the breath of God.

So, what we want to understand is that the Holy Spirit comes to us and breathes into us the life of the church. Now often, when we think about what happens when we "receive the Holy Spirit" or are "filled with the Holy Spirit" or are "anointed by the Holy Spirit," that we think about what happens to us individually. That there's a change within each one of us, and we do believe that it's the Holy Spirit that sanctifies us and changes us and transforms each one of us. It gives us spiritual gifts, and those gifts are used to bring about the fruit of the spirit. The Holy Spirit into each one of us brings love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those things that God sends and transforms each one of us from the inside out.

But there's another component that's important and maybe more so that the Holy Spirit does. And it changes a group of gathered people together from just a bunch of gathered people into the living Body of Christ.

So what I want to do is we're going to move down from the very beginning of Acts 2 to the end of Acts 2 - verses 42-47 and I want to go through that and let's look together at what happens to a group of gathered people together when the Holy Spirit is breathed into them, when God breathes into them the breath of life.

Let's jump right into the Scripture itself. We'll start with verse 42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship to the breaking of bread and the prayers." The Holy Spirit breathes into a group of gathered people a devotion to learning and living the faith. A devotion.

I was on an airplane a few years ago, flying back from Dallas to Houston. I ended up sitting next to a guy who was older than me, was a little scraggly, and he had on a Rolling Stones T-Shirt. And on his arm, he had a tattoo of the Rolling Stones logo. I don't know if you remember it, it's the red lips with the tongue hanging out.

We got to talking about it. I said, "It looks like you're a Rolling Stones fan." And he said, "Oh, yeah, I'm an incredible Stones fan. Since one the first tours when they came to the United States, they come about every three years, and any time they're here, I go to as many of their concerts as I can while they're here in the States. I was just in one in Dallas, and now I'm going to go to the one in Houston." He said, "I hope before I die to go to 100 Rolling Stones concerts."

Now, on the one hand, I thought to myself, "There's probably some better things you can do with your life than run around and just listen to the Rolling Stones concerts." But on the other hand, there was a certain kind of awe or respect that I had for someone who was that devoted to anything. That much sort of commitment - I love the word devotion because it's this joining together two words. The word for love - I'm devoted to you, I love you - but it also implies a certain discipline that goes with that love.

I heard a pastor talk not too long ago about going to Africa. I've never been there, and it's one of the things on my bucket list. But he went to preach in Africa in several places. And while he was there, he talked about arriving and being told that the people were going to be coming and would be walking as much as two days to hear him preach. To come to the worship service together. And he stayed in this guest house, and it was next to this little church. The service wasn't going to be in the church, it was going to be outdoors. But on the workday before even the evening service, he woke up and heard at 5 a.m. these voices singing in that little sanctuary next to him. There were men and women, and they were singing hymns antiphonally. First, the men would sing and then the women and then they would sing together, at 5 a.m., before they went out and did their work for the day. And he just marveled at their devotion. The heart, the desire that they had for the faith.

And here where it's easy. Right now, you don't even have to get out of bed.

It makes me wonder about our devotion. Have you ever looked over at a Bible and thought, "There's dust on that thing. I haven't looked at that in a long time." Or have you ever thought, "When was the last time I spent a significant amount of time in prayer?" Not prayer for a particular thing, just for that moment, or for grace in the morning, or even a prayer before going to bed. All those are great, but when did we last spend a significant amount of time in prayer.

Have you looked at your worship attendance is like every Sunday? How many Sundays a year are you in worship? We're devoted to working or to our families, but as followers of Jesus, as people inspired and filled by the Holy Spirit the culture of our community should be that underneath all of those devotions is this core devotion, this foundational devotion to living and loving like Jesus did. To learning the faith and living it. When the Holy Spirit fills a community of people, it inspires a culture of a devotion of learning and living in the faith.

Then he goes on. Lest you think that the disciples this early church are so committed - or as the saying goes, being so heavenly minded their no earthly good. It says, "Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles." They made a difference. The Holy Spirit breathes into the church the power and the desire to address the pain of the world around them.

Let's not kid ourselves. People came to Jesus, not just because of the power of his message. People came to Jesus because they were sick. They were desperate. He healed them. He cast out demons. He cleansed lepers. He brought in the outcasts. He addressed their anguish and pain. Friends, we live in a world where there are evils all around us without any question. There are people who are hungry, who are sick, who have cancer, or have Covid-19, who are poor, or uneducated. It could be racism. There are all sorts of evils, of ills and pain in the world that we are called on to address. That seems to be impossible, but we know that God the Holy Spirit can use us for wonders and signs.

I've been reading this book by Jacqueline Novogratz. I heard her interviewed on the radio and it prompted me to go buy her book. It's called *A Manifesto for a Moral Revolution: Practices To Build a Better World*. Here's her story. She went to Rwanda about 30 years ago. She'd been a banker. She went to Rwanda and decided to set up a bank there - a non-profit bank that provided micro-loans to tried to change the face of Rwanda. It survived through all the wars, the ethnic cleansing, and it's made a huge difference in the economic ability of Rwanda. Sort of a long way to go.

But she says that what led her to do that was that she was listening to Steve Jobs speak. She heard him say, "We need a technological revolution." And she thought about it, and she said, "Well, it's great to have a technological revolution, but underneath it needs to be a moral revolution." Here's what she says, "What we need is a moral revolution, one that helps us re-imagine and reform technology, business and politics, thereby touching all aspects of our lives. By moral, I don't mean strictly adhering to established rules of authority or convention regardless of consequence. I mean a set of principles focused on elevating our individual and collective dignity: a daily choice to serve others, not simply benefit ourselves."

Wow! Let me say a word to our high school seniors. I can't even imagine over the next decades the great things that will happen in and through you. You know technological changes, diseases healed, great companies started, families built. But I guess I'm hoping for more than that. I'm praying that the Holy Spirit will fill you and you will lead in a moral revolution. That you all who are filled with the Holy Spirit because you've been shaped and formed in the life of the church that that gathering of called Christians will lead us in that kind of moral revolution. To use those incredible great technological things not just to get rich, or for yourselves or for the people you love, but for everybody. To serve others.

Wonders and signs happen when the Holy Spirit fills each one of us and fills the community of the faithful so that we can address the pain of the world.

Let's move on to verse 44: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need."

The Holy Spirit breathes into the church incredible, amazing generosity. Let's note what this *doesn't* say. It doesn't say they sold their possessions and distributed the proceeds to those whom they really liked. It doesn't say they sold their possessions, and they distributed the proceeds to all those who deserved it. No, it said, they distributed the proceeds to all who had need.

I heard this marvelous story about a golfer named Roberto De Vincenzo. He died a few years ago, but he's famous for one thing. In 1968 he gave way the Masters by signing the scorecard incorrectly, by signing an incorrect scorecard that his partner had kept. It gave him one more stroke, and they had to count that - when there are two conflicting scorecards, you take the highest one. So, he gave away a chance at a playoff to win the Masters. That's amazing. That's got to be heartbreaking. That's the story that still follows him.

But I think there's a more powerful story. Three weeks later, he won the Houston Open, and after he won, in the parking lot, a woman approached him and said that she had a tiny baby who

was dying of leukemia, and she asked for help. He gave her hundreds of dollars right there as she told him that story about her baby dying of leukemia. Afterward, they were in the clubhouse again, and the guard came up to him. He asked him about the lady. "Did you give her money?" He asked. And Roberto De Vincenzo said, "Yes, she has a child dying of leukemia." The guard said, "She doesn't have a child dying of leukemia. She's always scamming people here. We try and run her off. I don't know how she got in. I'm sorry, but you've been conned."

De Vincenzo said, "So she doesn't have a child who's dying of leukemia? That's the greatest news I've ever heard!" He wasn't worried about the fact that he'd been conned, he was thrilled that there wasn't a baby dying of leukemia.

You see, generosity is not just where you give your money away. Generosity is this open spirit that desires to help people in need.

This church I have to say has been amazing and generous. Throughout this Covid-19 time. I've been here fourteen years, and every time we had a need the people of St. Luke's have just opened themselves up and shared. And I just stand in awe of it; I'm amazed by it. I do believe it's the Holy Spirit's moving among us to open, to inspire amazing generosity.

But it isn't just us. Right now, in this time, there are businesses, there all sorts of places that are barely staying alive. We can be generous to owners of those businesses; we can make a difference in their lives. There are so many non-profits, well beyond the church who are not experiencing the same type of generosity toward their way. And I just want to say that when the Holy Spirit fills a church, there is this explosion, this outpouring of generosity, not just the toward the institution but towards the whole world. The Holy Spirit inspires. When the Holy Spirit breathes into the church, the breath of life, it inspires amazing generosity.

Then it says in verse 46: "Day by day they spent much time together in the temple; they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts..." So the Holy Spirit breathes into the church life with others.

The word that is translated in this whole passage as fellowship is the word *koinonia*. We think of fellowship as a sort of partying, just sort of enjoying, slapping each other on the back. That hospitality is certainly part of it. But fellowship - the word *koinonia* - means life together. It's a deeper connection. It's a sense of realizing you're connected down at the roots. That when one of you hurts the other hurts. It is something deeper than opinions; it's being connected at a level that's deeper than socioeconomics, that's deeper than demographics, deeper than age. It comes from the fact that we are all fed by the same well of life. That regardless of opinion or

political party or demographics or socioeconomics or race or almost anything else, that we are part of the same body of Christ, and we drink from that well of life that Jesus pours into us. There are no solitary Christians. We choose to live life together.

There's a Jesuit term that I've sort of been reading about and its *accompaniment*. You know when someone accompanies a singer, this is accompaniment. Meaning I'm going to be with you. So, when you're hurting, I'm going to be with you. When you're celebrating, I'm going to be with you. If you're poor, we're going to be with you. If you're rich, we're going to be with you. We're going to be together and that the essence of the faith is not, "I'm going to fix you." But the essence of faith is "I'm going to be with you." *Koinonia* - a life together.

Now the passage ends with these words: "...praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." The Holy Spirit breathes into the church a contagious witness for Christ.

Why do you think that the "Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved?" Why do you think that this early church just grew like wildfire? Well, it's because those disciples - the witness of their love for each other was powerful. But they weren't afraid to tell the story.

In Acts 4, for example, Peter and the other disciples are told they're creating a riot and that they just needed to be quiet and settle down a little bit. And Peter says, "But we cannot stop speaking of what we ourselves have seen and heard." Can you say that?

I want you to notice something, and you might have noticed it already if you're paying attention. That these components of what the church is like when it's filled with the Holy Spirit match our Inside-Out Habits. Our five Inside Out Habits. So, for example, they devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching, to the fellowship to the breaking of bread and prayer. Friends, that's where we pray and worship. We study the Bible. Many wonders and signs were done through the Apostles. We give ourselves away in service. They distributed the proceeds to any who had need. We give ourselves away in generosity. Day by day, they ate their food together in their homes, and they were in the temple together. We make friends. And finally, this last one. They had the goodwill of all the people and day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. We tell our stories.

Next Sunday, we begin a new sermon series called "The Story of God and Us." The point is that we want you to be able to tell the story of God. If somebody came to you and said, "Tell me about this God of yours." You might pick one thing and say, "Well, let me tell you about Jesus."

But the Biblical story is a narrative that begins with creation and ends with perfection. And it is a story of a relationship between God and us that comes and goes, but God never gives up on us. It's full of brokenness and reconciliation. And it's always moving toward God's preferred future. So, we're going to be able to tell that story. So that you'll be confident in it and be able to share what all the *Kerygma*, the essence of the Gospel with anyone who asks.

We're celebrating our 75th anniversary - our 75th birthday of St. Luke's church this year. And the Covid-19 has us a little behind schedule, but we're working on it. We're going to keep celebrating those 75 years and what God has done in our midst.

I know for a fact, for sure, that on a November day in 1945 in the auditorium of Lamar High school, the Holy Spirit came down and breathed into that gathering of people so that they became the church. The living body of Christ. So that they could devote themselves to the apostles teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and prayer. So that wonders and signs could be done through them. So that amazing generosity could flow out of them so that they could be in life together and tell the story of God to the world.

That's still been happening, year after year, decade after decade. And I have every confidence, every belief that it will continue until Christ comes again.

Let's pray together. *Most gracious and loving God, we thank you for what you have done as you pour your Holy Spirit into the gathering of your disciples and transform us into the body of Christ. We're bold to pray on this Pentecost for a fresh outpouring of that spirit. That you would bind us together in your love and use us that your will might be done. In the name of Christ, we pray, Amen.*