

"THE STRENGTH GOD GIVES"
May 19, 1991

TEXT: Acts 1:8 "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."

As I said a few moments ago, today is a very special day in this church. A "red letter day" as symbolized by the stoles which Mark, Rick, and I are wearing. It is special, first of all, because it is Pentecost, the day when Christians all around the world celebrate that wonderful something which vitalized the early Christian church.

But it is also special because today we receive into membership the sons and daughters of this church. And, as the Holy Spirit empowered those early Christians, these young people bring spirit and vigor to our life as a church. We look forward to their presence in worship, their involvement in ministry, their special vitality in our fellowship.

But that does not happen automatically. In the first chapter of Acts Jesus told his disciples, ". . . You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." And the message of Pentecost has always been that what really makes a church a church is the presence of God's Spirit.

Before Pentecost, the disciples were just a frightened band of men and women, lacking both purpose and power. Huddled together in that upper room, they started at every noise and cringed when anyone came to the door. They were frightened of the Romans, frightened of the Jews, and, like many folk today, frightened of being afraid. More like fugitives than a church, they were no real use to God --or to themselves.

But then a strange thing happened. Somehow the Spirit of God --the Holy Spirit we call it-- laid hold on them. And they became new and different people. No longer frightened, or confused, or uncertain, they discovered within themselves the power to change history, to turn the whole world upside down.

We do not know exactly how it happened. The Bible tells us only that ". . . a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." (Acts 2:3-4)

And that is not much to go on. But, brief as it is, it tells us all we really need to know. That no one needs to be harried and anxious, fearful and tense, confused and uncertain. We do not have to stay the way we are. The Spirit of God can take ordinary people like ourselves and give us new power and new purpose.

God's Spirit can give our lives not only dignity and meaning, but all those wonderful things most people want and never have enough of. In the book of Galatians we read, ". . . The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law."

All those things can be ours if we really want them --as the gift of the Holy Spirit. We know how hard they are to get on our own. We have tried to find them again and again, but we never seem to succeed the way we would like. But God offers them as a gift, The gift Christ promised when the Holy Spirit came upon us.

But how do we find this Holy Spirit, or, help it find us? The Bible makes it sound so easy --and so all at once. "Suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." (Acts 2:2-4)

Is that all it takes? Do we just sit there and wait? Well, not quite. I once read about a shipping company which advertised an opening for a radio officer. On the day of interviews, the waiting room was crowded with applicants, waiting and talking together over the sound of the office loudspeaker. Suddenly one of the applicants got up, went into the inner office, and a little later came out to announce that the job had been filled.

As you can well imagine, the other applicants were not very happy. "Look here," one of them said, "we were here first. What gave you the right to go in before we did?" To which the successful applicant replied, "Any of you could have gotten the job if you had only paid attention. While we were sitting here a message came over that loudspeaker in Morse code, saying, 'We want to fill this position with someone who is constantly alert. If you hear this message, come into the office immediately.'"

In much the same way, God always tries to get His message to us. But too often we are not paying attention either, not even in church. We come --sometimes-- but most of us do not really expect much to happen. So nothing much does. But on that first Pentecost it was different. Those early disciples were not just sitting there. They were waiting. Expecting Jesus' promise to be fulfilled. In the first chapter of Acts Jesus charged them

"not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, 'you heard from me.'" (Acts 1:4)

So, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place." All together and waiting for something to happen, expecting something to happen. For them, it seems to have happened all at once. For many today, it comes a little at a time. But when we gather in worship, if we really expect something to happen, it does. And, whether it happens all at once --as it did on that first Pentecost-- or a little at a time --as it often does today-- we find new strength and new direction.

And that is my prayer for this church --and for each of us, its members. That the Spirit of Christ may come upon us and give us power to be His witnesses --in Milwaukee, and in all Wisconsin, and to the end of the earth. Then, and only then, will God's will really be dominant in lives of men. Then and only then will you and I really know the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control."