

The Spirit's Push
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
May 20, 2018 – AM Sermon
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Acts 2:1-21

So today is the last day of the liturgical journey we started way back in November. As I mentioned last week the liturgical journey is about remembering the life and work of Jesus, and it follows the same story portrayed in our windows. We started over here in Advent and Christmas remembering the hope and joy of Jesus' coming. From there we moved on to the stories of his earthly ministry – his teachings and his miracles. That's what we talk about in Epiphany. Then we move into the season of lent and we remembered our sins, and Jesus' painful journey to the cross to pay for those sins. On April 1 we gathered here on Easter morning to celebrate Christ's resurrection! Then last week we celebrated Ascension Sunday and we remembered how the Father didn't just raise Jesus from the dead, He raised Jesus to His right hand and gave him all authority in heaven and on earth. Today, on Pentecost Sunday, we will complete the journey. From the throne of heaven, the ascended Jesus sends us the Holy Spirit. God sends his life giving Spirit into us, and not just into us, but through us out to the end of the earth. Let's listen to the story of Pentecost.

A couple of months ago I heard a story about an evangelical preacher who had an experience that illustrates the intensity of the divisions in our society. I wish I could remember the preacher's name or where I heard this story because a story is always better when you have those details, but alas those details have packed up and left my 51 year old mind. This preacher was interested in connecting with the rest of the world and shining Christ's light in new places, so he set up a meeting with an activist and leader from the LGBTQ community in California. This minister had traditional views about same sex marriage and followed the traditional Biblical interpretation of this issue. The LGBTQ activist was not a Christian, so he obviously had very different views from this pastor on a whole range of issues. But they sat down to talk, and although they disagreed vigorously, they enjoyed their conversations and decided to keep meeting. After four or five meetings, the pastor's friends found out about the meeting. They were not happy. How can you be talking to a person like that! They are our cultural enemies! They are on the other side! Stick to your own folk! At about the same time the fellow LGBTQ activists found out about the meetings. They were furious. You're talking to Evangelicals! How can you talk to people like that? They are our cultural enemies! They are on the other side! Stick to your own folk! Both men were a little shocked by the intensity of feeling.

Such is the state of the divide in our society. Of course, these divides have always existed. There have always been divides between black and white. There have always been divides between republicans and democrats. There have always been tensions between rich and poor, and men and women. So the lines of division are not new, but the intensity of feeling is new. A 2017 study out of UCLA asked registered republicans and registered democrats whether they would want their children to marry someone of the same political party. In 1958, 33% of democrats and 25% of republicans said yes that was important to them. When asked the same question in 2016 the numbers had doubled; 60% of democrats and 63% of republicans wanted their children to avoid political intermarriage. It's the old dividing lines, just a greater intensity of feeling. Don't talk to those people! Stick to your own kind!

On this Pentecost Sunday, can we see that the Holy Spirit is pushing us in exactly the opposite direction from this social trend? As we watch the Holy Spirit move these Galileans out of the upper room and out into the streets of Jerusalem to preach to Parthians and Medes and Elamites, can we sense that the Holy Spirit has a fundamentally different motion from this fearful withdrawal that I just described? We may live in a world that feels like it's splitting apart, but we just read a story where the Spirit pushes people together under the grace and the Lordship of Jesus.

The first century world was divided too. There were walls between men and women. There were walls between slaves and free people. There were walls between tribes and nations. There were walls between Jews and Gentiles. Just like in our world, these divisions didn't just exist, they had some intensity. People felt the acrimony. Jew's didn't eat with Gentiles. Samaritans and Jews weren't allowed to talk with each other. The Zealots tried to incite Jewish revolution and plotted assassinations. Just like today these divides tended to push people into defensive positions; they wanted to huddle up with their own tribe. Kind of like what the disciples had been doing all the way up to the day of Pentecost. After Jesus' death they had lived in real fear. They had huddled up in locked rooms for fear of the authorities. Since the resurrection things had improved a bit. They were in the temple everyday worshipping together; but it was still their little group doing their little thing. There is nothing in the disciples' past that would make you think that they would be great ambassadors for the kingdom.

But the Holy Spirit comes on these men and they are changed. They are not sitting in an upper room looking at each other anymore. They are sent out! They are going places they never thought to go, they are meeting people they never thought they'd meet, they are doing things they'd never thought they'd do, all in the name of Jesus. In this story they find themselves pushed out into the streets of Jerusalem proclaiming the gospel to people from around the world in their own native language. By the time the book of Acts is done the Spirit pushed them out to Damascus, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, Thessalonica, Athens and Rome. By the time the book of Acts is done, the Spirit pushes them out in front of the Sanhedrin to proclaim the gospel to the leading religious leaders. By the time the book of Acts is done, the Spirit pushes them out in front of the Areopagus to address the leading thinkers of the day. By the time the book of Acts is done, the Spirit pushes them out in front of governors and kings. By the time the book of Acts is done, the Spirit is about to push them out into the court of the emperor himself. I would wish I could say that the Spirit pushed gently, but verse 2 tells us it was a violent wind that blew in that upper room. This is not a gentle push. The Holy Spirit is lighting them on fire and giving them a two-handed shove out into the streets of Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit pushes them out with the grace of Jesus in their hands, in their hearts and on their lips.

On this Pentecost Sunday, I want us to know that the Spirit is still shoving. In a divided world, fear and anger tends to make us withdraw from those who are different. But the Holy Spirit pushes us out with the grace of Jesus in our hands, in our hearts and on our lips. The Holy Spirit shoves us out so that a fearful world can know the life-giving grace of Jesus.

I want to close this morning with some observations about what happens to us when we let the Spirit push us out across divides. Two things. Two aspects of the Spirit's push. First, The Spirit shoves everyone. We all get pushed. In the Old Testament, the Spirit pushed selectively. The Holy Spirit was active in and among God's people, but it tended to fall mostly on anointed leaders. For example, in the book of Judges the Spirit doesn't fall on everyone, but more on the judges themselves. In Judges 15 the Holy Spirit falls on Samson and he takes out 1000 Philistines. Also, the Holy Spirit filled Moses as he led the people through the desert, but the

Spirit was not all the people. In Numbers 11, in one of his burnout moments, Moses wishes it was different. In verse 29 he says *“How I wish all God’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on all of them.”* Pentecost is the answer to that prayer. The Spirit doesn’t just want the Moses and Samson types. He wants sons and daughters to prophesy. He wants young men to see visions and old men to dream dreams. *“I will pour out my Spirit on all people!”* Everyone gets shoved. Everyone gets pushed out, out into some strange place with the gospel in our hands, in our hearts and on our lips.

Second, when the Spirit pushes you out, the life you change may be your own. In the book of Acts, when the disciples go out into the world, their message is for the salvation and blessing of other people, their lives are changed too. I’m sure the people who were converted by Peter’s sermon went home that night, lay down in their bed and felt like everything had changed for them. But I promise you that, after that day of tongue-speaking and conversions, when Peter and the rest of the disciples went home and lay in bed they were spinning too! ‘What just happened? Who are you Lord? And who am I? And where is this all going?’ When the Spirit pushes you into new places for Jesus, everyone changes.

A story from my own life. So you all know that I am pretty deeply involved in this CityFest initiative. This gathering of churches from all over West Michigan for service, worship and witness. The events cover the whole summer and they culminate in a great big worship service on September 9, down at Ah-Nah-Awen Park. Churches from all over West Michigan will participate. A couple of weeks ago I went to one of those preliminary CityFest events. There was a big prayer meeting for the national day of prayer and I went as one of the prayer leaders. May I confess to you that I didn’t want to go? I was busy and it was a Thursday night which was my Golf league night, and the weather was good and I wanted to hang out with my LaGrave golfing buddies! But I could feel the Spirit shoving me and so I went. The meeting happened down at New Hope Baptist Church. That’s a predominantly African American church over on Delaware Street. It’s a big church, a leading church in the city. There were all sorts of business, civic and religious leaders there, and the crowd was really diverse – African Americans, Latinos, Asian and white churches were all well represented. We prayed together for 2 hours. I led one of the prayers, so I got up and prayed in my nice little buttoned-down Christian Reformed prayers and that was fine. But the vast majority of the prayers were very different from mine, because most of the people in attendance and most of the people praying came from Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions. So for example, when you and I pray, we mostly focus on the words. When I lead, I carefully choose my words for my praises and petitions, and the way you participate in my prayer is by listening to what I say and following along with the sense of my words. That’s not how these Pentecostals pray. They pray in the Spirit. That means when the Pentecostal preacher got up there to pray, he prayed words, but the words of the prayer were less important than the feeling of it, the spirit of it. His prayer started small but quickly built up to a strong pitch of emotion and praise. As he built up the congregation built up with him. Pretty soon he was shouting ‘glories’ and ‘alleluias’ above the whole congregation and the congregation was shouting right with him. The whole place was rocking with amens and glories. It wasn’t about the words. You couldn’t even hear the words!! You didn’t engage this prayer with your mind; you engaged it with your body and your hands and your lungs. After one of my Pentecostal brothers had finished one of these prayers I looked over at him. He was shaking. His lower lip was trembling with emotion and tears were streaming down his cheeks. I won’t soon forget the look on his face.

I love our worship services. I am an organ and stained glass window kind of guy. I like sense in my prayers and order in my worship. I feel the Spirit when I worship that way. But there in that church I felt the Spirit too, in a another way, a very different way, and it made me wonder if when we divide our churches up the way we do, whether we aren't missing some of the richness of the Spirit's work. Do you see what happened there? The Spirit shoved me out to do ministry, and I was the one who was challenged and changed. This is the way things go with the Spirit! Ask anyone who works in prison ministry. Ask any teenager who's ever been on a mission trip. Ask any Deaconess who's been out on visits to shut-ins. The Spirit pushes you out into ministry and you're the one changed. Have a blessed Pentecost everyone! Rejoice in the good news of this day! The ascended Lord has poured out His Spirit on you. That Spirit aims to fill you from top to bottom! So be prepared to be shoved.

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