

Acts 2, 15
Acts: Word and Spirit
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6-8-14

Last week, if you were in worship, we talked about how one of the things Jesus does profoundly well in our lives is ask the right question at the right time. And how Jesus often walks into our lives unannounced – even uninvited – and asks a question like: do you want to be well?

Jesus, the Word of God, interrupts our lives with a Word. But have you ever stopped to think about why the people who encountered Jesus seemed to be ready for that moment of decision, why is it that simple questions like “do you want to be well?” or “who do you say that I am?” were almost always met with decisive answers? I mean, we get asked questions every single day, and some of them are even important questions, but rarely will we turn our lives around for “would you like fries with that?” Or “what do you think of this color?”

What makes Jesus’ encounters with you and me and with the people of the first century so life altering is that where the Word goes, the Spirit goes, as well. Jesus’ words, and his presence as the Word, changes lives because the Spirit – that powerful, consuming fire called the Holy Spirit – goes before it.

A friend of mine was telling me about how his son loves to pray at meal time, and he takes it real seriously, too. He has everybody grab hands together and bow their heads. So to open our message today in prayer, I would like to have everybody grab hands and bow your heads and I’m going to pray like my friend’s son prays for this message.

Let’s Pray...Jesus, Jesus, Jesus...Fire, Fire, Fire. Amen.

So, if you follow the church’s yearly calendar (we have a fancy word for it in the church we call it the liturgical calendar), and all that is the calendar of important dates and festivals that are celebrated by God’s people of all stripes. Today on the church’s calendar is what we call Pentecost.

And briefly, Pentecost is just a fancy name meaning fifty. And it signifies the 50th day after Passover, which was the weekend on which Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. And when those first 50 days had passed after Jesus was crucified and resurrected, this is what happened, and we read it in Acts chapter 2:

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested 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. And at this

sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language.

After this happens, the apostle Peter goes on to speak to the 11 other disciples and tells them again the story of Jesus of Nazareth, how he was sent into a lawless people and preached good news of healing and redemption, and the forgiveness of sins; and how he was delivered over to be crucified, died and raised again on the third day. Now these were the very same disciples who were with Jesus all three years of his ministry, but they still didn't understand what he was saying. They had enrolled in the full graduate program in Jesus' discipleship, but still their eyes were dark. It even says in Luke 24:11, after Jesus was raised and his followers were told about it, they didn't believe and thought it was an idle tale.

Parenthetically, does anyone else find it ironic that the number of years of a seminary program equals the number of Jesus' ministry? And I would say that most of us come out no more ready than the disciples did.

I say this sort of tongue and cheek, but there's a lesson for us here. Jesus disciples were asked life changing questions, were given the instruction on the scriptures and their meaning from the master, and were shown amazing things. So why did it fail to sink in? Why, time and again, did the disciples just flat out fail to grasp what the Kingdom of God was all about?

I think the answer lies in what happened at Pentecost. At Pentecost, the Witness of Christ, the Words he spoke and the Truth of what he came to do in the disciples' lives, were finally fused with the Spirit of God. That is Witness, Words, Truth don't fully come to life until they are wed with the Spirit.

Truth without the Spirit, like it was on that first Easter, is like an idle tale. You see, there is a loving relationship between the Word of God and the Spirit that fills it. So that you can't have one without the other, and you know this from your own lives. Everyone of us has had that person who supposedly is speaking truth to us, but isn't doing it in a loving way, but rather patronizing way. Truth without love is not truthful. And likewise, there are people who will withhold the truth from us because they're worried it will hurt, so they just give us sugary niceties—but they're not really loving us by not telling the truth.

This is why Jesus said in John chapter 4 to the Samaritan Woman who asks for a drink, he tells her later on that the hour is coming when true worshippers will worship in spirit and truth. What John is saying here is that The Great God is the one God who is not only Word, but also Spirit, and these two live together in this beautiful loving, truth-telling relationship. In theological speak, we call this the Trinitarian hypostatic relationship of God (Father, Son, and Spirit flowing seamlessly together in perfect union and ministering through one another).

Ok, so that's a little bit heavy for today, and I promise that's the last I'll say about the hypostatic Trinitarian relationship, but I just want y'all to know that I was paying attention in Systematic Theology 101 when they taught us this stuff.

But why I tell you this, why we need to know that the Truth of the Gospel must be fused with the ministry and love of the Spirit, is that if it doesn't, our witness as a community, our life in Wabash, and our relationship to God as a community and as individuals will never get off the ground. If we are going to be a place of healing, like that pool at Bethesda, that house of mercy, we must have both.

And to illustrate this, I want to share two experiences of the very same thing, one experience that was healing, and one that was hurtful.

So I was baptized and raised for a few years in the Lutheran Church, anyone else? Now Lutherans believe in infant baptism, then when you get to be about 12 years old, you go through this thing called Catechism, where you learn the adventure story of Martin Luther, or Brother Martin as Lutherans call him. And in Catechism you would have to memorize this thing called Luther's Small Catechism. It's a series of questions and answers about Christian Faith (which is not bad).

But when my cousin Sam was 12 years old, his parents were attending a Lutheran Church and Sam started catechism with all the other kids his age. In Luther's Small Catechism, there are all sorts of questions like: what is the fifth commandment and what does it mean?

And you would have to memorize:

Thou shalt not kill.

We should fear and love God that we may not hurt nor harm our neighbor in his body, but help and befriend him in every bodily need [in every need and danger of life and body].

Then on graduation day in front of the whole church, each of the students would have to stand up together and the pastor, Pastor Ron, could ask them anything from Luther's Small Catechism. Now Sam was a pretty nervous kid and he really didn't like being in front of people. So it was absolutely mortifying for him to have the pastor in front of the whole church ask him, what's the fifth commandment, and him not be able to give an answer. In addition to that, because he was different from the others, he was often picked on. So you can imagine how the truth of what he was learning didn't feel to him like truth.

Now, if we were go gather together over a glass of wine for a catharsis session, I would guess that every one of us could come up with a similar story from our own lives where truth was not filled with the spirit and, as a result, felt very untruthful.

Now, I'm not saying that Confirmation and learning the facts of our faith is a bad thing; it's a very good thing. In fact, that is one of the things I want us to do better with our kids, that's why we're instituting things like Godly Play, but it must be done in a way that is filled with the Spirit.

Now on the other hand, take a very similar story, a person I know who was badly wounded by the church. In fact, it was the stage on which her family was destroyed, by poor decisions and infidelity. Take a person who is raw and wounded and offer her God's Word presented in the form we call Liturgy, which is just another term for making sense of the Scriptures within the chaos of life. And you will meet a person who has been profoundly healed by the very same words and very similar statements. Only this time they were different because they were given to her as a gift, by a community who lived them as a part of their daily walk. Words, Truth, The Witness of Jesus Christ in Scripture, healing, teaching, instructing, and even rebuking, only this time instead of empty, hollow words of judgment and self-righteousness, this Word was filled with the loving presence of the Holy Spirit.

The Word along with the Spirit can make our community, can make our house, the house of Bethesda, where healing and teaching, where rebuke and restoration take place, where honesty and love go hand-in-hand, and where the Spirit of God, and the truth of God reign.

I want to close by turning with you to a story late in Acts chapter 15, and it's a story about what happened when a group of Jews went down from Jerusalem to a town called Antioch and shared the good news with a group of Gentiles or non-Jews. And these Gentiles become believers and they begin to have fellowship and sit together and eat and share life together, sort of like Israelites and Palestinians nowadays. People start asking why are they doing this, and people start saying that these people worship Jesus Christ and so they were called Christians. We didn't come up with our name, someone else did that. So this wonderful healing thing is happening, and they begin to send missionaries out, Paul and Barnabas were first sent out. So all these great things are happening and everyone is encouraged until, some believers of a very traditional—what's called the circumcision party in Jerusalem—come down to Antioch and say, "This is no good. You've got to be circumcised if you want to be a part of God's salvation story." They were from a Jewish sect called Pharisees. Paul used to be one of them.

Pharisees get a bad rap. Here's why they were the way they were. The Greeks used to persecute the Jews and kill them for their beliefs. And the Pharisees held on to their faith. For them, the law of Moses and the covenant of God represented by circumcision was a healing thing. Now they see these people, these Gentile converts for whom circumcision was a shameful thing, it was a hurtful thing. And so at Antioch they came to loggerheads, the verb here literally says, they took on the establishment, and said you cannot require that of these Greek believes—it's too shameful, you'll drive them out.

So Peter comes back to Jerusalem and they have a council to decide how they keep the fellowship of Christians a healing place and not a hurtful place for everyone whom God is inviting. And in Acts 15, Peter stands up and here's what he says, in closing...

Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me.

Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

“After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.’ Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God.”

The people never assumed that they could understand the Word of God without the testimony of the Holy Spirit. They never assumed that the Bible or the teaching of the few was enough. They always relied on the movement of the Holy Spirit. So it seems to me how we can be a church that is a place of healing and mercy and restoration is by being a community that relies on the Testimony, the Word of truth, and on the Spirit. And where we run into trouble is when we try and use one without the other. Word and Spirit, Witness and Presence, Truth and Holy Spirit will lead us ever closer to being a Bethesda, a house of Mercy. Let's pray.