

Pentecost Sunday – May 24, 2026

Acts 2:1-21, 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13, John 20:19-23

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Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia!)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. I think that if you were to take an informal, random poll of people with some awareness of the varieties of Christianity and ask them which of the traditions was most “spirit filled,” Lutherans would not be the first denomination most of them would mention off the top of their heads. You see, we don’t move around a lot in our worship services, I mean beyond the liturgical calisthenics of standing, sitting, and kneeling, punctuated here and there by the sign of the cross. We certainly don’t sway when we sing, or clap. We don’t throw out unscripted “Amens” during the sermon or the prayers. Our pastors don’t tend to shout or get carried away into spontaneous effusions of emotions as we preach. And while we certainly visit and pray for those who are sick, and some of them do get better, we don’t do the kind of public faith healings that happen in some Christian contexts. All of that kind of behavior from traditions that aren’t ours is what most people tend to associate with the work of the Holy Spirit. Now, I don’t necessarily want to argue that those things *aren’t* manifestations of the Spirit. But I do want us to think about whether these are the *only* ways the Spirit works, and I want us to base our thinking on the biblical witness. So, since we’ve got these three wonderful texts in front of us this morning that can serve that purpose, I want to draw from all three of them in order to look for clues as to how the Holy Spirit might still be at work among us, even those of us from northern European extraction who sometimes get labeled as the “frozen chosen.”

Our first reading from Acts is the Pentecost story. And there are two things that I want to lift up in this reading. First, this descent of the Holy Spirit, and the speaking in other languages about “God’s deeds of power” to all the foreigners present is a remarkable development in terms of direction of focus. These foreigners are diaspora Jews, those who have migrated to other countries and who have assimilated into their new contexts. It is likely that many of them no longer spoke the Aramaic or Hebrew languages of the Holy Land. And this was something that had been going on for centuries by this time. What you might expect, if this was going to be the beginning of God establishing God’s kingdom, would be a miracle in the opposite direction; that God’s chosen people would once again be able to understand the language of their ancestors. But that is not what happens. Instead, their new reality as God’s people embedded in foreign lands, assimilated into foreign cultures and languages, is taken not as a problem to be fixed, but as a feature to exploit in the service of God’s mission. It seems that God is not interested in homogenizing the world’s diversity, but in blessing that diversity. What this means for us as the church today is that we should not expect others to change to become like us. On the contrary, when we take seriously the church’s central and defining task of communicating the gospel, we can expect that our encounters with those who are different from us will instead end up changing us. Their language, their culture, their way of seeing the world — these become not obstacles to overcome but the very material we work with. Think of it like a mini-incarnation. Just as God became like us in Jesus, out of great love for us and deep care for our wellbeing, so our concern for those we carry the gospel to will lead us to take them and their reality just as seriously.

The other thing to notice in this reading is Peter’s explanation for what has happened. He says that it is a fulfillment of God’s promise through the prophet Joel that one day God would pour out the Holy Spirit on “all flesh.” This is a long-anticipated move away from a religious hierarchy mediating God’s message that goes back at least as far as Moses wishing that all God’s people would be agents of divine communication. (Num. 11:29) And here – following Joel – we have this expanded in ways that I wonder if even Moses could have imagined. Because this not just for the all the men; it also includes women and girls. And I don’t think that even we sophisticated moderns

have imagined the scope of this very well. Who did you think of when you heard that the tongues of flame descended on them and they began speaking? Was it the 12 disciples? Our text doesn't explicitly say that. It doesn't even say "apostles" that is in brackets in the bulletin text, and next time we have this reading I'm going to change that. It only says "they," and "they" refers back to the previous chapter when 120 of "them" were gathered together and chose Judas' replacement. And that group explicitly included some women. So why haven't we been imagining some of those women as those here in chapter 2, filled with the Holy Spirit and proclaiming God's mighty deeds in foreign tongues? I think we need some new icons and some new Sunday School paintings of that.

The move away from a hierarchal, top-down sort of mediation of God's word plays out in how Paul talks about the gifts of the Spirit in our second reading. Nobody gets all the gifts. They are distributed. And I want to think about that for a second. When you give gifts, do you tend to give the same gift to everyone? Maybe if you're a grandma with lots of grandchildren it's gift cards for the lot of them. But usually you pick a gift appropriate to the person you're giving it to, don't you? Haven't you said of a gift you gave, "I saw this and thought of you"? So, if God truly takes our diversity as something to celebrate and use, as our first reading hints, doesn't it make sense that the Spirit's gifts are given to match the interests and aptitudes of their recipients? Think again of Moses. When God asks him to go speak to Pharaoh, he complains that he's not a good speaker, that he's "slow of speech and tongue." (Ex. 4:10) God doesn't respond by fixing that for him. Instead, God appoints his brother Aaron to be his "mouth," and the two of them work together to accomplish God's mission. That dynamic is what Paul is describing here for the diverse group of Corinthians he is writing to who are having trouble getting along.

And that brings us to our gospel reading and the particular manifestation of the Spirit we see there. This reading is the first part of the Thomas story that we had back on the second Sunday of Easter, which takes place on the day of Jesus' resurrection. And I want you to think about where things are at between Jesus and his disciples at this point. The last time they saw Jesus, he was being arrested by a cohort of Roman soldiers and their collaborators. One of them had betrayed him, most of them had run away, and while Peter hung on for a while at a distance, he ends up denying Jesus three times. Now it's the third day after Jesus' crucifixion. They have found the tomb empty, but so far only Mary Magdalene has seen Jesus. And then Jesus is with them in the flesh, showing them his hands and side. That *could* read as an accusation: "Look at what your unfaithfulness has done to me!" But Jesus preempts that by what he says to them. And he says it twice to make sure it sinks in: "Peace be with you!" He wants them to know that things are good between them. "Peace be with you!" That's forgiveness. And then he breathes the Holy Spirit on them. And what is the one thing that this gift of the Spirit enables them to do, the only thing mentioned here? Forgiveness. Just as forgiveness is the key to our relationship with God, so is it the key to our relationship with one another: Forgiveness is what is required whenever you put a diverse group of people together. If we are going to be the church, a community that uses our diverse gifts for the common good, we are going to need heavy and repeated doses of forgiveness. And you know that's right. Can I get an Amen?

That brings us back full circle, now, on this Pentecost Sunday. Whether or not we sway when we sing, emote when we preach, or shout out unprompted "Amen's" in our worship, we can be assured that when by God's grace we are attending to the treasure of the gospel that we have been entrusted with, when we are invested in the lives of those we encounter, when our varied gifts and abilities are appreciated and working together for the common good, and when God's forgiveness is working on us and through us — when all those things are happening, you can be sure that we are indeed "Spirit-filled" and that we are being drawn into the life that God has promised through Jesus, agents of the life-changing good news that Christ is risen, Alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!)