

## **“The Spirit Bears Witness”**

Romans 8:14-17; Acts 2:1-21 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – June 8, 2025  
Pentecost Sunday

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our spirits might be opened to your Spirit that we might testify to your glorious works. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Have you ever been here at church early on a Friday morning? I mean like really early, way before I ever get here. Because if you were to show up, say around 7:30 on a Friday morning, you might bump into a gathering happening in Bailey Hall. Does anyone know what goes on in there on Friday mornings? It's a Toastmasters meeting. Have you heard of Toastmasters? It's an international organization that is dedicated to helping people become better public speakers. They literally just get together each week and practice giving speeches to one another, to develop their confidence and ability. If you want to hear a testimonial, get in touch with Larry Knight, because it was super helpful for him.

I bring this up, not because it's important for all of us to know what's going on in our church facility and how we're welcoming the community into our gathering spaces, but because it's occurred to me that each Toastmasters meeting is kind of like a mini, secular Pentecost. Pentecost is dramatic, with the wind and the fire. Because it's fun to decorate for and dress up for, we tend to think of it as an event, which technically, it was. But the point of Pentecost isn't Pentecost itself.

The Holy Spirit didn't come upon those early disciples so that they could say that the Holy Spirit had come upon them. The goal was not a spectacle of wind and flame. This wasn't an "unboxing" video, where it didn't really matter what was in the package because we're just supposed to focus on the anticipation of the unwrapping process. Pentecost is more like a Toastmasters meeting: the Spirit came to empower and equip the disciples to start talking. Not about their hobbies or their pet or a trip they took once, but about "God's deeds of power," as their audience put it.

The Spirit does not arrive just to make us feel special. Paul writes that the Spirit is part of us being adopted into the family of God, but not for our own sake. The Spirit, Paul says, comes to "bear witness with our spirit," that is, the Spirit comes to help us proclaim the gospel.

In the case of those early disciples, of course, the scale was extra impressive. The Spirit didn't just get them talking, but empowered them to share about God's deeds of power in the many languages of their neighbors, immigrants from all the surrounding areas, islands, and countries. That in itself was a testimony to God's desire for unity across all boundaries of culture and idiom. When the Spirit empowers us to speak out, it's both what we say and how we say it.

We are living in complicated, difficult times. There are a lot of people out there saying a lot of stuff, much of which has little resemblance to the truth. Our faith is being twisted and abused for purposes that are contrary to the gospel. We

may feel overwhelmed by the chaos and uncertain about how to respond. We may feel helpless in the face of repression enacted on multiple levels at once. But it is for moments just such as this that Paul reminded us of the power of the Holy Spirit. We do not need to fall back into a spirit of fear, rather we can open ourselves to the presence of God and allow that very Spirit to bear witness with our spirits. The Spirit is what can give us the courage and the capacity to speak the truth of God's desires for our world into situations where those desires are being thwarted and degraded.

One of my good Disciples pastor colleagues told a story this week about an experience he had at a local gas station where he lives in Valparaiso, Indiana. As Tim was going in, he saw a guy coming out with a nazi tattoo on his arm. It wasn't something obvious like a swastika, but rather something more obscure that you might only recognize if you'd been made aware of what to watch for. He was momentarily tempted to confront the guy, but chose not to. Instead, when the clerk asked him how he was, he said, "I was great until I saw that dude's nazi tattoo." She was appalled and shocked, and the conversation went on from there. Tim was able to share that he was a local pastor and would be participating in their community's Pride celebrations this weekend. The clerk was delighted to hear that a church was supporting the LGBTQ+ community and proclaimed as he walked out the door, "We just gotta love everybody!"

It seems to me that this whole conversation was a Pentecost moment. Tim was inspired to speak up, to bear witness to God's desires for our world, and when he did, the Spirit was shared and the clerk was also empowered to speak that transformative love into being as well. I was also struck by how this story would have been a great example for discussion at our recent bystander intervention trainings. If Tim had said what he considered saying – "Are you still a nazi, bro?" – that would have been an example of direct intervention. But it wouldn't necessarily have been the smartest approach, as it might have risked putting other people in danger. Instead, Tim's response combined elements of the other four D's of bystander intervention. By naming that the tattoos were nazi symbols, he was documenting what had happened. By giving the clerk the information, he was delegating to her the authority to recognize those symbols next time. By talking it through with her after the guy had left, he delayed his response so that they could have a safe de-brief. And by moving the conversation on to Pride, he was distracting from the initial problem, thus giving it less power to harm the people it impacted.

One of the most important tenets of bystander intervention – after interrupting active harm taking place – is to communicate clearly what kind of world we want to live in. In Pentecost terms, that means speaking up to remind ourselves and others what God desires for our world. When people are being harmed, the Spirit invites us to speak up to protect their dignity and bodily integrity. When

immigrants are being dehumanized, the Spirit empowers us to proclaim that God's love knows no borders and all people are precious in God's eyes. When trans siblings are being attacked and marginalized, the Spirit calls us to bear witness to the holy and rich diversity of God's creation and demand that their lives be honored and respected.

Pentecost is not a moment unto itself. It's God taking the lid off, opening up the mouth of the body of Christ, so that we might proclaim the life-giving, life-changing love of God. There is a reason Peter referenced the prophet Joel talking about people seeing visions and dreaming dreams. Those visions were about how God wants the world to be. Those dreams were about how the way things were could be changed to the way things ought to be.

Things all around us are chaotic and confusing. Institutions we've trusted to be there our whole lives are being dismantled with no thought to the consequences. Neighbors quietly trying to live their lives and support their families are being harassed and detained. We may feel like we want to do something, but we don't even know where to start. But now it is Pentecost, and the Spirit is here. The Spirit is here to bear witness with our spirits. The Spirit is here to remind us that it's always helpful to start with telling the truth. Throughout scripture, the Spirit is associated with the truth. The Spirit keeps us honest and gives us the courage to speak the truth, even and especially when the powers-that-be are twisting words around like it's Opposite Day. Like the Spirit, truth cannot be contained; it will fly free, no matter how hard

people try to hold it in or dress it up in obfuscation. When Jesus said he was sending us an Advocate, it was this Spirit of truth, this Spirit of courage he was talking about.

In a few moments, we will sing a song inviting that Spirit – a Spirit of gentleness and restlessness – to “stir us from placidness.” Are you ready? Are you ready to start talking? To start speaking up? To start proclaiming God’s desires for our world? To celebrate enthusiastically the humanity of all God’s children? Are you done being placid? Are you done letting people motivated by greed and power steal the name of Jesus from us? Are you ready to stop being fearful and start bearing witness to the truth? Are you ready to experience the glory of being adopted by God, being invited to follow Jesus, and being inspired by the Holy Spirit to proclaim God’s deeds of power? It’s Pentecost. The Spirit is ready to take the lid off. Hallelujah and Amen.