"Divine Power"
First Presbyterian Church of Battle Creek,
June 8, 2025
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John 14:16-21, 25-26.
The scripture reading comes from the Gospel of John 14:16-21, 25-26. Listen to the word of the Lord.
Jesus said, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever--the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.
"All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."
The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Today we celebrate the feast of Pentecost, sometimes also called the birthday of the Church. If you remembered, you may be wearing an article of clothing that's red and typically our banners and stoles pick up on the color as well. All of this red is to make us recall the flames of fire that appeared over the head of the disciples who were gathered in Jerusalem. For they received power from on high that day which would enable them to be a witness to the risen Christ.

We call this power the Holy Spirit. But what do we mean by that? We tend to talk about and to God and certainly about and to Jesus. But the Holy Spirit is a bit harder to identify and to address.

Have you ever tried to visualize the Holy Spirit? If you wanted to draw it, maybe you would depict it as a flame of fire, or a wind, or a burst of light. But while the Spirit seems elusive, we can discern the Spirit's presence by what it does. Is it not the Spirit that breathed life into us and every created thing? Is it not what gets you up in the morning, what makes you passionate about an assignment, what gives you hope? And is it not the Spirit who moves us to be compassionate, giving, and generous with our spiritual and material gifts?

Still, for most of us the Holy Spirit is a bit of a mystery. We name it the third person of the Trinity, we sing hymns to the Spirit and invoke its presence, but if pressed to pinpoint its distinct activity in our life, we may struggle. By contrast, members of charismatic or Pentecostal churches are much better at that. The teller at my bank is a member of a Pentecostal church, and so I asked her about the Holy Spirit. "Anna," I said, "tell me how you celebrate Pentecost in your church? Because at our church, we put up banners that are red, we dress in red, and we sing hymns in the Spirit's praise. She smiled and said, "Every Sunday at our church is Pentecost."

This morning I want to highlight three distinct character traits of the Holy Spirit. The first one is that the Holy Spirit is a helper. Jesus himself calls the Spirit a Comforter, an Advocate, a Guide. The Spirit comforts us in distress. The Spirit gives us words to say when we share our Christian faith or are under attack. And the Spirit guides us into distinguishing truth from falsehood, and facts from lies. We sure need to rely more on the Holy Spirit in the opinions we hold, the leaders we follow, and the passions we pursue. Why not seek the Spirit's help more often!

On the day of Pentecost, the disciples were also able to hear what was spoken by people of different nations and tongues. For the Spirit gave them the ability to truly hear, to truly listen, to truly understand. If you have ever experienced the fall-out of a misunderstanding, you can be sure that the two parties didn't invoke the Holy Spirit. For this Helper can stimulate our ability to truly listen and to understand and to hear.

Perhaps the final observation about the Holy Spirit being our helper comes from the origins of Pentecost. Pentecost was a Jewish festival long before the church took it over. And can you guess what this Jewish festival celebrated? It celebrated the giving of the Law of Moses to the people of God. The Law, including the Ten Commandments, was given as a helper so the people of Israel could keep the covenant that God had made with them. Yes, the Law was given to the people of God so they could act like the people they were meant to be. So, I wonder if you and I will make use of this divine helper. Will you call on the Spirit to draw closer to God? Will you invoke the Spirit's presence in times of indecision or doubt?

The second point has to do with with the chronological order of when the Holy Spirit is given. If we were Greek-speaking folk, we would know that the word Penta means fifty. And that is to say that the Holy Spirit is given to the believers exactly fifty days after Easter. Once Jesus is raised, he walks about for forty days in a resurrection body, and then ascends to the Father. And after another ten days, the heavenly storehouse opens and the Holy Spirit is poured out, making it a total of fifty days, Pentacost. This shows that there is an order, a sequencing in God's economy of salvation. Nothing happens all at once. It's not like a jackpot or a sudden windfall. Instead, God reveals his presence gradually over time. First, there is God the creator, then Jesus the Savior, and finally the Holy Spirit. Such gradual revelation of God requires patience from our end, but most importantly attentiveness. We need to pay more attention to God's gradual unfolding in our lives, name the moments when God became real, and start tracing the index finger and the handwriting of the divine in our lives.

The last point about the Holy Spirit has to do with the location of the outpouring. Scripture contains two accounts, with the first one being in the Book of Acts, Chapter 2, where the followers of Jesus—both men and women--- are gathered in the Upper Room, along with Jesus' mother and are praying. And “suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting”; and “tongues as of fire” rested upon each of them, filling them with the Holy Spirit. The second account is from the Gospel of John 20 where the risen Christ walks into the room with the gathered disciples and breathes the Spirit upon them.

In both accounts, Jesus' followers receive the Holy Spirit while they are gathered. The Spirit is received during worship. This means that spiritual power is discharged whenever we gather in Christ's name. We ourselves may no longer be aware of it, but people who visit us can feel the Spirit's presence. They come here and they notice. Because the Spirit cannot go undercover but has to make itself known and it does so in the climate of a church, its atmosphere, serenity, and peace. So, friends, let's make worship a spiritual practice—for it's here we tap into the One who helps us walk in the ways of the Lord. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer for Pentecost

Blessed Holy Spirit, you are the love between the Father and the Son, the power beyond all understanding, the wisdom from on high. You train us to become holy, to choose wisely, to walk confidently by your counsel. Help us to celebrate the truth that unless it is well with our soul it is no good anywhere anytime.

God of surprises, disillusion us of the notion that change can be stopped, that we can freeze time. Deliver us from the tendency to turn our loves into possessions and relationships into still lives.

Make us open and daring to embrace the leading of your divine love, to receive and return, and to do so in gratitude and the sure knowledge that you are the source of all that is good and true and beautiful.

On this Pentecost, we are mindful of all those who speak and are not being understood, who hear but do not listen.

We pray for leaders in civic government worldwide that they may be moved by your Spirit into listening more and speaking less, into praying more and ruling less, into loving more and demanding less. We pray for those worldwide whose country is engaged in war or plagued by civil war and military regimes. Give them patience, courage, and the power of your word. We pray for the thousands of refugees who have lost their home, family, connectedness. Grant host countries and its peoples the compassion and mercy to look beyond the weight and burden these people bring and let them experience the joy that comes from helping and assisting those in dire need.

We pray for ourselves that the love language of God may become second nature, native to what is spoken here. Train us, teach us, and mold us into the people you had in mind from the beginning of time, so our words and deeds will bring peace and call into being your powerful presence. This we pray in the name of the one who came, gave, released and showered us with all bounty imaginable, namely Christ our Lord, who taught us to say when praying: