The Holy Spirit and The Revolution of the Intimate

The Rev Rob Shearer + AbbeyChurch + Sunday May 24, 2026 + Feast of Pentecost + Acts 2: 1-21 and John 7: 37-39

I have a friend who likes to say that when we dare invoke the Holy Spirit, as we do on this sacred feast… that when we pray for Spirit to come from the four directions, we'd best watch our backs. That we'd better brace ourselves to be transformed and shaken from our own agendas and need to control…We'd better be ready to let go.

And this, friends, is, indeed, why we gather today - to mark this Holy Ghost power; a power not merely for our spiritual ancestors – but to claim it for ourselves and for the good of the world - in this very time and this place. *[pause]*

The Holy Spirit, in today's story from the Acts of the Apostles, is depicted as fire and wind – and in our gospel, as water flowing out from the hearts of Jesus' followers. Whatever, or *Whomever* we might imagine that this Holy Ghost is, it's clear that this figure is primordial and elemental and powerful.

And I don't know about you, but when I hear this story from Acts, it's the tongues that get me - strange as they are - I like the weird stuff, as you know. Tongues of fire *and* tongues of language - people hearing the amazing mind-blowing works of God in their own mother tongues.

On that day, Jewish folk are gathered in Jerusalem from around the diaspora, speakers of many languages - gathered for the Festival of Weeks, Shavout (Shuh-voo-oht) – 50 days after Passover – when they start hearing the mighty works of God from the mouths of people that don't speak their language.

The phrase used in the Greek text is *laleō heteros glossa* – literally to speak in other languages. And though the tradition of speaking in heavenly or angelic tongues develops later, on this day, these are simple translatable, understandable utterances. This is not insignificant - I'd suggest that in this moment the Holy Spirit begins the undoing of the divides of culture and language that had been in the popular imagination since Babel.

After the understandable accusations of drunkenness at such a scene, Peter invokes the ancient Hebrew Prophet Joel to the crowd that day - reminding us that this Spirit is, indeed, ancient – not some Christian correction to a Jewish God – but deeply rooted in the inclusive God of the Hebrew people.

That God, speaking through Joel hundreds of years earlier was already speaking of radical gender inclusion, underlining that all genders and age demographics are included in the act of prophesying - and that *this* Spirit is for all people. Here is a reminder that the misguided sense, rooted back in events in the creation stories, that only one gender or people or age can prophesy can lead or takes predominance over another is, for lack of a better word, heresy. [*pause]*

The African-American theologian Willie James Jennings calls what happens at Pentecost – *the revolution of the intimate* – where what, or, rather *Whom* it was that hovered over creation, that spoke through the prophets, that Mary received, we may now all receive. *The revolution of the intimate* – a revolution that makes God with and within us not just for 33 years in one time and place in Jesus - but for all people.

Yes, this is a universalist Spirit – poured out not on any one gender or tongue or people or age group or religion - but as the text says, on ALL flesh.

And if that wasn't enough, *this* revolution of the intimate has this beautiful effect of freeing us from the educated colonial heresy of being locked in our brains and brings us right back into our bodies. And with this, Willie James Jennings reminds us that: "The miracles are not merely in ears. They are also in mouths and in bodies. God, like a lead dancer, is taking hold of her partners, drawing them close and saying, "Step this way and now this direction."

It goes even deeper! For the day of Pentecost forever instilled a foil against the idolatries of culture or religion – giving us our own trickster – like the wind; full of power but uncontrollable and unpredictable.

Right when we think we've got it just right; the right ritual or modality or doctrine or point-of-view - the Holy Spirit descends like a diving dove just as the spirit did at Jesus baptism – or as wind and fire at Pentecost to remind us to be careful, be humble. This is real power.

For when this wind blows there is an unshackling of religion from the gatekeepers and the controllers, there can be no calcified doctrine or hierarchy or systematic theology. Since that day, when the wind of the Holy Spirit blows – the word Spirit literally meaning wind; Ruah – *wind, breath* in Hebrew and pneuma – *breath, to blow* in Greek – we are consumed, comforted and, when need be, corrected.

Of course when the Spirit blows, the result is not just a revolution of the intimate for one person, but a complete reshaping of the social order.

Pastah J, an African-American pastor from Chicago notes that the miracle of Acts 2 is actually not so much the tongues of flames or wind - but is in the fact that – if we read on just a few verses - they actually held all things in common and lived a radical life without wanting to kill each other. That they were able to live a life of trust and love so rooted in the power of God's Holy Spirit and, from that, that they gave the excess away to those in need. What a witness!

In the early 20th century, the Spirit fell at Asuza Street in Los Angeles as a black and white preacher started an integrated, economically diverse pacifist community who called themselves the Pentecostals.

That same Spirit called the descendants of that community, black Pentecostals, to form the majority of the marchers in the Civil Rights movement.

That same Spirit had woman ministers and prophetesses who would be leading and forming churches and whole demoniinations decades before the mainline protestants would reluctantly do so.

I recently was talking with a friend who had been deeply hurt by a problematic Pentecostal movement – and I do want to underline that though I speak of this movement positively here, I'm all too well aware of the shadows of how the freedom of the spirit can be coopted.

As we spoke, she confessed to me that the thing she missed most about that time was the freedom in her body; the arms raised, the dancing, the embodiment – but also said she'd found some of that in the bodily movement in the traditional liturgy. The Spirit blows where She wills, right? [*pause]*

Our forebears in faith, at their best, were so alive from the experience of Jesus' resurrection and the power of the Spirit that had come upon them, they were willing to give their lives – all they had - entirely over to a bigger Story of hope.

I don't know about you, Beloved Community, but that's Good News in this age of fascism – where the idols of individualism and nationalism and race are rampant - the same old heresies that one culture or language or gender is superior is alive and well in fascism and white Christian nationalism.

In our history the Spirit shows up so that small communities of radical sharing, deep discipleship and spiritual practice can transform the world into beauty.

But just to be clear, this is not our work. As Pastah J, Rev. Jonathan Brooks suggests, it's not possible on our own steam. Jennings, again, calls the day of Pentecost a *prevenient grace* – meaning that that the coming of the Holy Spirit was unexpected and not of our own doing. "This is God's doing [Jennings says]: no one helped, no one assisted, everyone only tarried. The waiting in prayer has not come to an end. It has only moved forward into an action fully of God."

It's not that we do nothing, for we are called, community, to come alongside where the spirit is working – Jennings calls it being a translator: "We need translators, people who will allow their lives to be translated, not just once, but again and again as the Spirit gives utterance."

The greatest liberation I've had in my religious life was when a spiritual director reminded me that I don't need to save the world. The work of transformation, of redemption, of conversion - of liberation is that of the Spirit. And we come alongside.

For the Holy Spirit is the ultimate agent of grace; all it takes is an openness, which is why we dare say "Come Holy Spirit", knowing darned well that the Spirit is already here and in us – and already on ALL flesh and all creation.

So, bracing ourselves for the wind and fire, for water to flow from our hearts, will we open ourselves to this Divine Creator Spirit? Will we let go and open ourselves to this revolution of the intimate?

Let us dare it -
Come Holy Spirit, come.
Say it with me –
Come, Holy Spirit Come. Amen.

All references from Willie James Jennings Belief Commentary Acts – 2017 Westminster John Knox Press - and also talks given by Pastah J / Jonathan Brooks at Inhabit Parish Collective Conferences in Seattle.