

From Spectacle to Spirit: The Deeper Miracle of Pentecost

First Baptist Church, Raleigh, NC
May 24, 2026

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Introduction

Good morning, It's a blessing to be with you this morning.

When you're asked to preach you might be worried that you can't come up with enough content. But with the lectionary passages from this Sunday, I'm not going to have that problem. There is so much to be said about all of these passages.

I must say though, I'm more used to sitting in the 6th grade classroom on Sunday morning, on couches and recliners -- in a circle -- having deep theological discussions. That's not quite the setting we have here -- but imagine we **are** sitting in a circle.

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And I'd ask you to envision the surroundings of the disciples as they sat in a room and witnessed the resurrected presence of Jesus depicted in the John 20 passage that we just read.

This was the evening of the resurrection day itself. Jesus had appeared to Mary Magdalene. Peter and John entered the empty tomb, but they were still confused. They saw His body was missing but they couldn't comprehend the resurrection.

That evening the disciples gathered together. The only way to get through this was -- together.

They must have also been sitting in a circle. Their room was smaller than this. They were probably sitting on wooden benches like these -- though I suspect theirs were less

comfortable than ours. Their room was dimly lit, with just a glimmer coming from an opening in a stone wall or a gap in the ceiling.

But the main element was not the furnishings. It was the atmosphere, the emotions. In this passage from the gospel of John, Jesus appears to the disciples when they are locked in a room. You can't blame them for hiding away. They were experiencing such a state of fear and confusion. Jesus had just been crucified. They stuck together and that seemed to be the only way they could cope.

But they were missing their teacher, their Rabboni, the one who always seemed to steer them back in the right direction when they didn't understand what Jesus was trying to teach them, or when they doubted that they could do what He was asking of them.

The disciples began that day in fear, and confusion. Then Jesus came upon them. He **reassured** them. He **imbued** them with his presence. He **breathed** on them to receive the Holy Spirit. And then said, if **you** forgive the sins of any, **they** will be forgiven.

Take that in for a moment. The very ones who struggled to understand Jesus' mission -- and their own calling — these are the ones He now commissions to forgive others. He does not scold them. He does not withhold. He breathes peace into the room and life into His disciples. This is the first Pentecost — quiet, intimate, in a locked room. The wind and fire will come days later. But the Spirit is already here.

The scene in Acts 2 is a bit different. First, it occurs on the day of Pentecost and Jesus has ascended. But the presence of the Holy Spirit is central to both of these passages.

And yet when most Christians think about Pentecost, we tend to remember the spectacle.

We remember the rushing wind. The tongues of fire. The miraculous speaking in different languages.

And understandably so. It is one of the most dramatic scenes in all of scripture.

But over the years, I have found myself wondering:

What if we sometimes become so fascinated with the spectacle that we miss the deeper miracle underneath it?

What if Pentecost is not primarily about strange speech... but about understanding?

What if the deeper miracle of Pentecost is that through the Holy Spirit, human beings become capable of truly hearing one another, crossing barriers that divide us, and becoming one body in Christ?

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With the divisions we feel today, in our country, in our communities, with those closest to us, it's easy to think we have lost the ability to truly **understand** one another.

Our perspectives are so different that it is tempting to throw one's hands up in exasperation and say, "I just don't understand where you are coming from." Perhaps you can do that with strangers, but it becomes much harder when it's family.

And then Jesus complicates things even further. Because Jesus tells us to welcome the stranger, to love our neighbor, to see every person as someone created in the image of God. Which means, **perhaps, no one is truly a stranger after all.**

But understanding other people is not easy.

It requires humility.

It requires effort.

It requires listening.

Stephen Covey once said, "seek first to understand, then to be understood."

That sounds simple. **But simple does not mean easy.**

Understanding requires us to move beyond our own assumptions and biases.

It requires discernment.

It requires us to resist the temptation to hear only the voices that already agree with us.

Even in reading scripture, we recognize how difficult true understanding can be.

We must constantly ask ourselves whether we are listening carefully to the text itself or merely imposing our own assumptions upon it.

And perhaps that is part of what Jesus was preparing the disciples for.

Because after the resurrection, after His ascension, after the locked rooms and the fear... they would need the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help them live, discern, forgive, love, and remain together in a fractured world.

And perhaps that is precisely the point. Left to ourselves, understanding one another is extraordinarily difficult.

Even among people who love each other.

Even within families.

Even within churches.

Which raises an important question:

If Pentecost is not merely about spectacle...

then what exactly does the Holy Spirit do?

If Pentecost were merely about dramatic speech, it would remain little more than a spectacle to admire from a distance.

But the **deeper miracle of Pentecost** is that the Holy Spirit enables people to reach one another across barriers that normally divide them.

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Look again at what Luke tells us happened that morning. The disciples are gathered. The wind rushes through the house. The tongues of fire rest upon each of them. And then the crowd gathers — and what a crowd it is.

Listen to who is there: Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs. Luke is not just listing geography — he is naming the known world.

And every one of them hears the disciples speaking in their own native tongue.

Imagine that for a moment. Imagine traveling to a foreign land — weary, far from home, surrounded by people you don't know and a language you barely understand — and suddenly hearing the gospel proclaimed in the language your mother used to sing you to sleep.

That is what the Holy Spirit did. The Spirit did not erase difference. The Spirit honored it. The Spirit did not require people to abandon who they were in order to hear the good news. The Spirit met them there.

Let me tell you about a moment when I felt that miracle myself.

Honduras Story

Most all of you know that I have traveled to Honduras for many years. I've had the pleasure of being there with many of you. Each of our trips involves some type of construction and in earlier years we would typically build a home for a family. On the first day, after we greeted the family, surveyed our construction site, and played a few rounds of the "hola" game with the kids, we would gather the family and all of our North American and Honduran workers to offer a prayer. We gathered around the cornerstone of the house and offered a blessing for the family and the multi-cultural community of Christ that had brought us together at that place. On one particular trip, I was asked to say the opening prayer. I had been studying Spanish somewhat, in an attempt to help improve my ability to communicate with our Honduran friends, but I was still very nervous and very unsettled in my Spanish speaking ability, and I planned to depend on our translator for this prayer. But when I began to pray, something surprised me. I began to speak in Spanish in a way that I didn't know I was capable of. I spoke the words of commissioning for that cornerstone block -- and the gifts of love that we were bringing that family -- in words that could be understood directly by them.

I didn't quite know what was happening or how it happened, but I do believe that the Holy Spirit was **beside me** at that moment and gave me the ability to communicate with them and bridge the cultural divide that separated us.

I would not claim that I suddenly became fluent in Spanish. And I'm not saying that I would call it "speaking in tongues."

But I experienced something important in that moment:

the realization that through the Spirit of God, human beings can sometimes move beyond barriers they assumed could never be crossed.

What I experienced in Honduras was not new. The same Spirit had been at work long before Pentecost — and continues to move far beyond it.

Moses -- Expanding Grace

In the scripture that we read from the Old Testament book of Numbers, Moses told the people to let Eldad and Medad speak. Let them proclaim that the Holy Spirit was among them. Moses wanted all people to be free to share the impact of the Holy Spirit on their lives, not just the seventy elders.

In John, Jesus told His disciples that the Holy Spirit would be with them. He spoke words of assurance but also commissioning, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” If they were willing to forgive the sins of others, then those people would be forgiven. This is an enormous responsibility, but one bestowed by an expression of grace and confidence.

And later the disciples felt the presence of the Holy Spirit, who gave them the ability to speak with, and live in community with, people very different from themselves. Through the Spirit, barriers of distance, language, and culture were overcome.

1 Corinthians 12 -- One Body

But Pentecost was never simply about **isolated spiritual experiences**. The Holy Spirit was not given merely so individuals could have extraordinary moments.

The Spirit was given to form a community.

That is why Paul writes in First Corinthians this familiar verse:

“For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...”

One body, with many members.

Different gifts. Different voices. Different experiences.

Yet somehow held together through the Spirit of God.

Paul understood that the church must include people with different gifts, perspectives, experiences, and callings.

Yet the goal was never uniformity. The goal was unity.

Not a community where everyone thinks identically, but a community where people remain bound together through the Spirit of God despite their differences.

Joel -- For All People

Peter made the same point when he reached back to the words of the prophet Joel on the day of Pentecost.

Joel had envisioned a day when the Spirit of God would no longer be limited to kings, prophets, priests, or religious elites.

Instead, God declares:

“I will pour out my Spirit on all people.”

Sons and daughters. Young and old. Servants and free.

In other words, Pentecost is not about creating a spiritual hierarchy.

Pentecost is about breaking barriers.

The Spirit does not belong to a select few. The Spirit is poured out upon the whole community of God.

Conclusion

And so, we return to that locked room.

That community began with a small group of people, in fear, overwhelmed with sadness and confusion when their Lord was crucified.

But then He appeared among them. The dim room was filled with light.

The isolation became reassurance. The fear turned into resolve.

And all were welcomed into communion with Christ.

Young and old. Men and women. Jews and gentiles.

The miracle of Pentecost was brought forth by the Holy Spirit to enable all of God's creation to hear and understand each other.

We are that community.

We are that community, the body of Christ,

And they will know we are Christians by our love.

Not merely by our worship. Not merely by our doctrine.

Not merely by dramatic spiritual experiences.

But by the way we listen. The way we forgive.

The way we remain together. The way we love one another as the body of Christ.