

The Work of the Holy Spirit

By Rev Young Joon Cho

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:6-8)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:1-4)

Today we are celebrating our worship service as the Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost means "Fifty" in Greek word. In the Jewish tradition, it is called Shavuot, the "Feast of Weeks" in English, and it begins on the fiftie

th day after the first day of Passover. Shavuot is the feast of offering God the first fruits of the spring harvest. Incidentally, it was reported last Sunday that in a Jewish synagogue in Palestine, a grandstanding seating area had collapsed in a crowd, killing 2 and injuring 60 persons. These were the people gathered together to celebrate Shavuot. As for Christians, this is the 50th day after the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the 7th Sunday after Easter. It was on this day of Pentecost that the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus' disciples gathered together in Jerusalem, and Christians celebrate Pentecost as the birthday of the Christian Church.

What is the Holy Spirit? Why is the Holy Spirit so important? Simply speaking, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God present in me, among us and in the universe. The first disciples knew Jesus as the visible presence of God among them, but you and I do not have that kind of privilege. But we have the Holy Spirit present with us, inspiring, comforting, encouraging, and guiding us. The Holy Spirit is the One who makes God real in our hearts, and Jesus Christ real in our lives.

When I think about my life, I wonder at times how I became a Christian! That's a mystery to me. I had been born in a non-Christian family. I had never heard the name of Jesus until I went to Sunday School when I was a 2nd grader by the invitation of my school teacher. I still remember the Bible verse I learned that day: John 3:16, "God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." And somehow I accepted it. That was the work of the Holy Spirit.

During the Korean War in 1950's, I could have starved to death, I could have been killed under the heavy bombing, I could have been kidnapped by the North Korean soldiers. But somehow I survived all these. And when I attended a revival service led by an American missionary, there I became convinced that my life had been saved not by my own power but by the grace of God. It was my conversion experience. That was the work of the Holy Spirit.

When I was a high school student, I felt called by God into ministry, and I enrolled in the Methodist Theological Seminary in Seoul, Korea in 1955. During the first week of the school, there was a series of special services, and on the last day, we had the Holy Communion service. I still remember very clearly that day and that time. When we were receiving the bread and wine, I was so deeply moved that I just could not stop tears welling up in my eyes. I tried to control my tears many times, but I just could not. I kept on thinking, "God is calling me, this unworthy

servant, into the ministry of Jesus Christ!" I felt so honored. I felt so much loved. I felt so grateful. That was the work of the Holy Spirit.

When I look back my 42 years of full-time ministry, there were difficult times, too. Yet, somehow I was saved from failures. Was that out of my own power? No, it was by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Probably, many of you can testify the work of the Holy Spirit in your lives as I have experienced. In the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians 1:13-14, we read, "In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory."

Now let us go back to the first Pentecost and consider several characteristics of that great event.

First, the Holy Spirit came at a time of crisis. The first Christians had met the risen Christ, they were overjoyed; yet, their circumstance was very desperate. The Jews and Roman soldiers were looking for them, to arrest, try, and punish or even kill them. They were in fear; they were scared. What would you do in a situation like that? What else could you do but to pray? That's what the first Christians did. They cried, "O God, save us. Show us a sign that you are the living God!" They kept on praying, remembering the promise of Jesus: "Do not leave Jerusalem. And wait. You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." And on Pentecost, that promise was fulfilled.

The Holy Spirit is with us always, of course. But it is the time of great need that we recognize the work of the Holy Spirit in a special way. I've met many people throughout my ministry, testifying that when they had utterly failed, or had become utterly helpless, the Holy Spirit was operating there with a saving grace. Even today, the Holy Spirit works in us, comforting and encouraging us, making us repent our sins, and giving hope and assurance of salvation.

All of us experience pain and suffering in our lives. Where there is life, there is pain. This is a universal human experience. William James, the famous American psychologist and philosopher, said: "If we can explain the present human situation, it is 'Zerrissensein' in German word, that is, a 'torn being.'" In everyone's life, there is an experience of being *torn*; our society is *torn*, too—look at the violent deaths occurring these days; the world is *torn*, too—look at what's going on in Palestine now. And look at what's going on in The United Methodist Church at present. We are trying to tear ourselves apart---and we say this is the best solution! Isn't this *torn* humanity?

Human history teaches us, and our experience verifies the truth that we cannot save ourselves on our own power! We need to gather together and pray earnestly as the first Christians did. "O, Holy Spirit, descend upon us, comfort us, heal us, save us from this *Zerrissensein*!"

Secondly, the Holy Spirit came with a mighty power! Acts 2 says that the Holy Spirit descended like a strong wind or a flame of fire. The Holy Spirit means power!

You know how powerful wind is. I remember the day when the tornado hit Hamden, Ct. about 30 years ago. The destruction was incredible. Many roofs flew away, cars were overturned, a hundred year old trees were uprooted. It looked like a war zone.

How powerful fire is! California is known to have big fires these days. Not too long ago, there was a big fire in northern California that destroyed hundreds of homes.

Just like wind and fire, the Holy Spirit was a transforming power that brought incredible changes to the first Christian community. They were freed from doubt and fear, they became bold and courageous. Not only that, they were experiencing mysterious gifts such as speaking in tongues, and communicating one another across the racial lines and language barriers.

In the ICor. 12, Apostle Paul says that there are varieties of gifts, but they all come from the same Holy Spirit. And he lists these: the utterance of wisdom, the utterance of knowledge, the gift of healing, working miracles, prophesying, discerning the spirits, speaking in tongues, and interpreting tongues. Paul says that all of these are gifts of the Holy Spirit, and they are given for building up the church!

We shall see many miracles happening when we become a spirit-filled church. There will be excitement, enthusiasm, outpouring love, sacrificial service beyond our imagination!

Thirdly, the Holy Spirit makes the Christian community grow. By the work of the Holy Spirit, a new, dynamic and powerful community called the Christian Church was formed. There were many wonders and signs by the power of God. Some people sold their possessions and shared it with the poor. They prayed together, they ate together, they shared together, and they spread their love to others. Acts 2:47 says, "And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, this small band of Christians in Jerusalem who had been trembling in fear became fearless witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They began to proclaim "Jesus is the Lord!" in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and beyond! Asia Minor at first, then Europe, then America, then Asia and Africa.

Do we want to see our church grow in number and spirit? Here is the answer. Pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Dear friends, the root of the United Methodist Church is in the Holy Spirit movement. Tomorrow is the 283rd anniversary of the Aldersgate. On May 24, 1738, John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, attended a worship service at a small church on Aldersgate Street, London. He was an ordained clergyman of the Church of England, former missionary in America, but his life was dry, exhausted, and joyless. He was trying to please God, to be a worthy servant, yet there was no joy in it. Even on that day, he went to that church reluctantly. While he was worshipping, somebody began to read the preface to Martin Luther's commentary of Paul's Letter to Romans. While hearing that, he felt his heart strangely warmed. He was convinced that salvation is not what we earn, but it is given to us by the grace of God. Maybe he had known that in his head but not in his heart. Now he experienced it through the work of the Holy Spirit. He became a new person, his ministry became spirit filled, and the Methodist movement began to spread. Many historians say that it was the passionate movement of Methodism that saved England from bloody revolution.

Before he died, he said: "I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast to the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out." I pray that all the United Methodists pray today to receive the Holy Spirit, so that we may become a vital church again, and save ourselves from another tragedy in Christian history. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen (Fairfield UMC, 5/23/2021)