Got Spirit?

Acts 2:1-13

I want to thank all who participated in last week’s worship, as well as the many ways you made Barb Mather feel welcome. I’ve had several come to me, inspired by her presentation and interested in becoming more involved in ministry. I look forward to talking with you in the weeks ahead.

As most of you know, Kathy and I spend the last week in Texas. Actually, part of the time was spent driving to Texas. Let me tell you, it’s a long way to Texas. Having completed the trip, and having felt the beginnings of Texas summer heat, I can assure you that Kathy and I are and will continue to be Iowans with an accent. It’s good to be back home.

Picture this: my extended family and I were all in the restaurant in Austin, waiting for my sister to arrive to celebrate their 10th anniversary. She had no idea who all was going to be there. They finally entered, and in one voice, we all shouted, “Surprise!”

Mouth open, deer caught in the headlights look…priceless. Sometimes you live for moments like that.

And I’m sure this was close to the reaction of those disciples when they saw Jesus alive again, culminating in his ascension. Up he goes, mouths dropped, eyes wide as saucers, speechless, dumbfounded, stunned.

Several years ago, my family and I pulled off another surprise party for my mom on the occasion of her 80th birthday. Dad fabricated a story about a plumbing disaster at my other sister’s home to get mom to accompany him over there, a reason that absolutely made no sense to her. They entered, everybody shouted “Surprise!” My family loves to shout “Surprise!” Mom was speechless, the desired effect was achieved.

Well take those moments of surprise, followed by speechless silence, and I think you have an idea of that moment after Jesus went up into the clouds. There they all were, standing next to each other, mouths agape. But then, the minutes turned into hours, and the days slowly turned into weeks. The disciples remained together, huddled, befuddled, but together. At one point, the weightier truth began to set in. He was ascended, up above the clouds as Lord of all, seated at the right side of the Father. Hallelujah! Jesus has triumphed. Glory! And yet, as wonderful as it was, the good news also carried with it another truth.

Plain and simple, Jesus ascended. The disciples did not. Like lapdogs who were told to stay put, they waited, and whimpered, and wondered, straining to see perhaps a glint of light from a distant object in the sky, “Isn’t that him coming from behind that cloud? I think I see him!” Each cloud looked strangely like him, but no, it wasn’t him. He remained up there. Time passed. Occasionally, one of them would look up, in the lingering hope that he would soon come back, but no, not today, not the next day, nor the next day, nor the next day, nor the next day. So, they sat, and thought about it all, until today. Pentecost.

Again, there they all were, together, sitting and thinking, hoping, praying, wondering, waiting, waiting for something to happen, something they remember him telling them about, a presence, a comforter, counselor, an advocate.

When all of a sudden, another surprise happens, like a dam which finally broke. Luke describes it in the book of Acts the way a survivor attempts to describe an earth-shattering event, something like a tornado, or a hurricane, the roar of a freight train, an explosion, or the rush of a mighty wind, only this wind did not destroy. It created. It brought to his believing and bewildered disciples the fulness of his truth and power. It was the presence of the Holy Spirit.

So much has been said and written about Pentecost and what it means. Among many things, it is our birthday as the church of Jesus Christ. On this day, we began. The first congregation was born as witnesses first heard the gospel story for the first time from a spirit-filled Peter. Convicted and also filled with the Holy Spirit, it is written that somewhere around three thousand people were baptized, and the first Christian church was formed, first as a brand-new sect within Judaism, worshipping in the temple, and then later as a distinct faith, meeting in house churches.

It all begins at Pentecost. The gathering, the worship, the prayers, the singing, the preached word, communion, teaching, fellowship, making disciples, it all begins at Pentecost.

Until Jesus returns, may that day be soon, you and I live in the light of Pentecost. The Lord reigns, and while we wait his return, you and I are gifted by the Spirit to continue his work. But what exactly are the gifts of Pentecost?

The apostle Paul spells out various gifts in First Corinthians: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophesy, discernment, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues. Isaiah has his list: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, or insight, piety, fear, or reverent awe of the Lord. It’s hard to tell what all are the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Paul listed a variety of gifts, which isn’t the same as an exhausting list. Isaiah listed six gifts of a reconstituted Israel, which Christians see fulfilled in Jesus. It’s hard to name all the gifts God gave the church at Pentecost, but several stand out as overarching and, in my opinion, what leads to other gifts.

**The first gift is the gift of reconciliation**. Another name for that is peace. Peter hit the nail on the head when he confronted the Israelites in the crowd, the same crowd that heard the disciples speaking in many languages He confronted them with the truth of Jesus, the truth of his crucifixion, and their part in it. They were that mob that cried out for Barabbas and demanded that Jesus be crucified and handed over to Rome for treason. He confronted them with the truth of this crime against God. Mind you, it was all done within existing Roman law, nice and legal. But it was a crime against God. And Peter effectively communicated this truth, with such conviction and persuasiveness, that their fellow Israelites were “cut to the heart,” as Luke describes it.

Cut to the heart. What a powerful phrase, “cut to the heart.” Let me ask you a question. Have you ever been cut to the heart? Has a truth of your life ever been revealed so clearly and accurately, that all you could say is, “That’s me you’re talking about. You’ve got my number. Guilty as charged.” It’s hard to hear that kind of truth anytime, much easier to hear it and accept it when told by somebody who loves you, much harder when it comes from somebody who doesn’t.

In 1978, I dropped out of seminary after the first year. It’s a long story. Anyway, I dropped out. Called my parents and told them. My mom couldn’t understand it and kept asking me why. After what felt like the tenth “Why?” I told my mother to stop whining about it. Strange, she never asked “Why?” again. Thirty years later, I’m visiting my parents, in between assignments in the Navy as a chaplain. And yes, I did go back to seminary. My mom reminds me of that time when I told her to stop whining, and I realized without her saying anything more how inappropriate those words were. For the record, don’t ever tell your mother to stop whining. After thirty years, the pained look on her face was still evident. Do you think I apologized? Yes, I did. “I’m so sorry Mom. I didn’t realize I hurt your feelings.” “You did.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Ok.”

I was cut to the heart. I should have never said that. But it led to a wonderful reconciliation with a woman who would never hurt a fly.

Consider this, those fellow Israelites who were approving of the crucifixion of Jesus, once confronted with the truth, asked Peter and the other apostles, “What should we do?”

Now, I suppose if Peter and the others had no love for them, they could have said something like “Just hold still while I bid God to hurl down a few lightning bolts on your head along with fire and brimstone.” But that’s not what happened. Instead, Peter invited them to turn from their ways and be baptized. The same people who approved of the crucifixion were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ and started the first Christian church. Talk about reconciliation! What a gift! Reconciled with Jesus, reconciled with the Father, reconciled with the apostles. Not a bad day.

The many opportunities you and I have to make peace with one other is amazing, when you think about it. Where I come from, reconciling with one another is like Whack-A-Mole at Chuck E Cheeses. Just when you whack one mole back down in the hole, another one pops up. There are all sorts of opportunities to forgive and be forgiven in God’s family. How can that be? Surprise! We’re not perfect. All of us are flawed somehow, in some way, which gives us the opportunity to practice the gift of God’s power to reconcile. The Holy Spirit gives us a desire to be at peace. It means speaking the truth in love and holding the door open for forgiveness. Did I say speak the truth? Yes. Did I say in love? Yes. It means showing that person the error of their ways and giving them the opportunity to make amends. And like so many real-life human situations, there may be a piece of the puzzle requiring us to look at ourselves as well. The speck we point out in the other person’s eye may not be as large as the log in our own. It means being open to the possibility that we too may have been wrong. But that’s all part of the gift of reconciliation, the wonderful gift that keeps on forgiving.

**Another gift at Pentecost is the gift of power.** Others may call it boldness, or courage, or endurance, the will to go the extra mile. It is believing that whatever good we do, we have help. We’re not alone in our efforts. We can endure a lot more and a lot longer than we thought we could. As Paul wrote in Romans, “If God is for us, who is against us?” We can become conquerors because of Christ.

Something changed inside each of those early disciples. No longer alone, huddled behind closed doors, turned inwardly against a cold, cruel world, a fire now burned inside each of them, the Holy Spirit, telling them, “Don’t just sit there, get up and do something for God! Get out into the world and spread the Word! Love as I have loved, live as I have lived. Don’t be fearful, be fearless. Don’t be cold, be bold!”

And they were. That very day, Peter preached the sermon of his life and baptized three thousand. That’s bold! The rest had it too. Imagine what that must have been like. I did the math. If it takes thirty seconds minimal to baptize one person, that’s two people per minute per disciple. Multiply that by twelve apostles, and it would have taken over two hours for twelve apostles to baptize three thousand people. That took discipline and boldness. “Alright you filthy heathens, all who know what’s good for you form into companies, platoons, and squads. First heathen into the water. What? Can’t swim? Too late. I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Next! Three thousand in two hours.

Power! Boldness! Regardless of opposition or obstacles, persecution or peril, those disciples plowed ahead, and despite the odds, gained a foothold in the world by the grace of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

You and I have that same power too. It’s what gives us courage not to give up on ourselves or each other, to try new things and create new pathways for God’s love to fill the hearts and minds of those we reach out to as a “friendly, faithful, and loving family dedicated to sharing God with our neighbors.” Think of it. Together, we are the church of Jesus Christ. That’s powerful. That’s bold. It’s what gives us the words Paul used when he wrote to the Philippians while in prison, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

You know, those cookies just keep on coming. The day before I left for Texas, I had seven dozen cookies to give to our community, and the day after returning another twelve dozen. That’s over Think of it: if each cookie represents a tangible expression of God’s love, and each box says, “Given in Love,” doesn’t it, then we’ve shared God’s love through these cookies at least five hundred times. That’s a bold cookie! The gift of the power of God’s love, even in a cookie.

There are many other gifts that came at Pentecost, and I’ll name one more, and it is **the gift of love itself**. It is the overarching gift, and what makes all the other gifts possible. It is the hardest to understand, and the hardest to live out. It’s why Jesus came into the world and why the Holy Spirit rested on those disciples and everyone who was baptized at Pentecost. It is why the church exists and how it has endured for nearly two thousand years. It is the most powerful expression of God we know, and what makes reconciliation possible. And those who get that, who love as he loves, have another gift waiting for them: eternal life, and if you wish to learn more about this gift, then I can think of no better place than here, and no better time than now, as we experience this gift through holy communion.