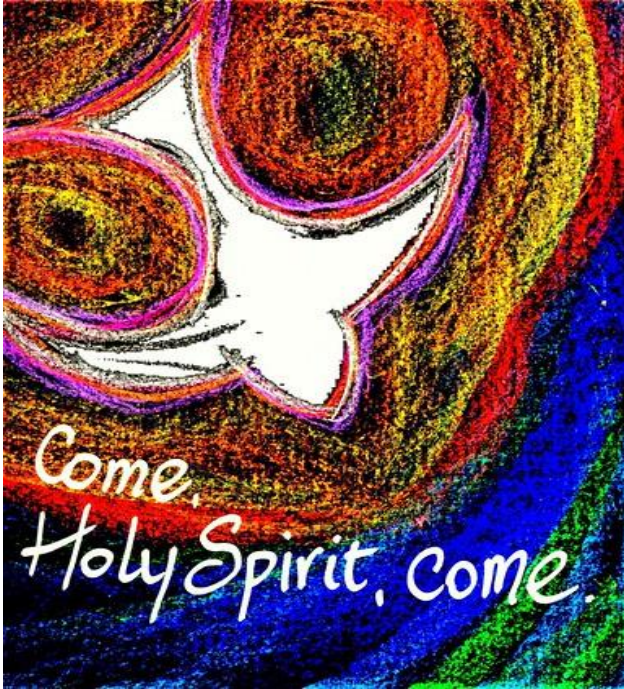


## **PENTECOST SUNDAY: SCRIPTURE PROCLAMATION - Acts 2:17-21**



***“This is what I will do in the last days, God says: I will pour out my Spirit on everyone. Your sons and daughters will proclaim my message; your young men will see visions, and your old men will have dreams. Yes, even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will proclaim my message. I will perform miracles in the sky above and wonders on the earth below. There will be blood, fire, and thick smoke; the sun will be darkened, and the moon will turn red as blood, before the great and glorious Day of the Lord comes. And then, whoever calls out to the Lord for help will be saved.”***

**TWO MEDITATIONS FOR PENTECOST, delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, May 23, 2021**

### **“MY FIRST PENTECOST”**

Congregation, I grew up in a very “low church.” As they might ask in limbo, how low did it go? Very low! What I mean is that the worship in the congregational church of my youth was very informal. It did not stand on ceremony and ritual. Our church observed Christmas and Easter, but didn’t take notice of any other Holy Days or seasons. No Advent, no Epiphany, no Lent, no Holy Week, no Pentecost. Those days and seasons just weren’t in our vocabulary as we worshipped Jesus Christ. And I didn’t miss them because I didn’t know that they were part of the Christian church’s rich liturgical tradition.

Imagine my surprise then when I began to find out what I was missing. The first clue came with a Sunday School program which I attended religiously, Sunday to Sunday, called *The Church Across the Street*. One Sunday each month our Sunday School class of middle schoolers would travel to another church in the Detroit Metro area to attend worship. Chaperoned by our Sunday School teachers and parent drivers we visited churches that were Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Southern Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, Methodist, Greek Orthodox, Quaker, and Salvation Army. We also took a Saturday to observe worship in a Jewish synagogue. It was a wonderfully broadening, learning experience, which probably helped make me from youth an *ecumaniac*—someone who believes heart and soul in ecumenism, the notion that Christians everywhere are part of a single *oikos*, a Greek word meaning “household,” as in Household of God.

All those visits were memorable. I'm so grateful for them. But one still stands out above the rest. Why? Because it was the occasion of my *first* Pentecost—the first time I had ever heard the word “Pentecost” and observed and celebrated it as a season in any way at all.

On that particular *Church Across the Street* monthly outing, our class drove all the way across the city to its far east side to attend worship at a Capuchin School for the Deaf. Worship was in the school chapel led by a Roman Catholic Capuchin priest. The Chapel was pretty full—about 120 of us, regulars and visitors combined. The students from the Capuchin School hosting us were also all middle school age. Yet it was a little eerie for a novice like me because many of these young people emitted strange, flat sounds as they sat in the adjoining pews, right through the service. In retrospect, I suspect that they were kids with multiple disabilities. Amazingly, no one blinked an eye or seemed to regard the sounds as disruptive. Instead, it was treated as a cacophony integral to our gathering.

Announcing it was Pentecost, reversing the events at the Tower of Babel when God scattered the people of the world with different languages to humble them, the presiding priest read the lesson for the day. It was the same lesson we share this morning from the Book of Acts of the Apostles, recalling how God's people, now blessed by the grace, power, and presence of the Holy Spirit, spoke in many different tongues, *but could understand each other perfectly.* (Acts 2:1-21) After blessing the reading to our understanding, the priest invited the choir to sing their Pentecost anthem. Twelve white-robed adult men and women stood in the chancel and began to sing. Yet there was no sound to be heard. The entire Pentecost anthem was expressed through motion by sign language, each singer in beautiful unison with the next.

Today, we see sign language all the time—don't we? For instance, when our Michigan governor and state health officials spoke to us in recent months, offering pronouncements and updates about our battle against Covid, there was always a signer present, almost front and center, communicating the spoken message with their hands. However, fifty years ago, signing wasn't common or wasn't seen. We've come a long way—a long, good way.

Needless to say, that Pentecost morning at the Capuchin School for the Deaf was a revelation. What a blessing to learn the story of Pentecost in this strange and wonderful context in which the good news of Jesus Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit were to my eyes being so dramatically illustrated. In those moments I felt so close to everyone in the chapel sanctuary--young and old alike; those deaf and those like myself blessed with hearing. And I felt as if I was spiritually hearing something transcending anything I might hear with my two ears that God wanted to share and impart to me. I am still moved by the memory of it all. Thus, for me the Holy Day of Pentecost is especially holy--close to my heart as a day of wonder and joy.

The God proclaimed by Jesus Christ is able to do incredible things— isn't he? Reversing, overcoming, or transcending all human differences of race, culture, language, experience, and ability that have been with us since the fall of the Tower of Babel, if not before, God makes it

possible for us know profound moments of unity and grace that give us a taste of what heaven will be like and what will even dawn for earth when his glorious kingdom comes. (*Genesis 11:1-9*) Amen? **Amen!**

### **“DISCERNING THE SPIRIT”**

We live in an anti-institutional, hyper-individualistic time when folks want to disavow the religious and embrace the spiritual. You’ve probably heard it said—“Oh, I’m not religious. I’m just spiritual!” That kind of statement always amazes me. Do folks know that the word “religious” come from the Latin *re-ligare*, meaning to re-ligament, holding things together so that we can make sense of them? In contrast, the spiritual can be pretty vague and wispy and not amount to much if it doesn’t have muscle and ligament to it.

Christian spirituality *is* religious because it has muscles and ligaments, figuratively speaking. How could it not, grounded as it is in the Word of God which is scripture? Giving it further body and substance are the example of Jesus Christ, as remembered and recounted by scripture, and the teaching of the Christian churches informed by divine word and example.

The Bible makes clear for us that there are all kinds of spirits and spiritualities. They are not equally commendable and worthy of us as God’s sons and daughters. In his own ministry, Jesus confronted many devilish, demonic, destructive spirits. As part of his healing ministry, he sought to exorcize and eliminate them so that they did not hurt or maim any more. One of the more spectacular moments of scripture is found in Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus casts a “legion” of demonic spirits into a herd of pigs that in a confused frenzy drive themselves over a cliff into the sea where they drown. (*Matthew 8:31*) I don’t want that kind of spirit or spirituality--do you?

Often talk of “being spiritual” is just a mask for the spirit of selfishness and self-indulgence. The Apostle Paul, who embraced Jesus’ teachings heart and soul, emphatically warned us against bad spirits and spiritualities that are very real and very dangerous. To his fellow Christians at Ephesus, he wrote: “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of darkness in this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” (*Ephesians 6:12*) Congregation, as the Apostle Paul makes clear here, this spirit-stuff is serious with a terrible capacity to oppress and diminish our lives. Those who have ears, hear!

At Pentecost, however, we celebrate the coming of a very different kind of spirit. As Jesus explained on the night of his Last Supper with his apostles: “The Helper will come—the Spirit, who reveals the truth about God and who comes from the Father.” (*John 15:26*) Yes, the right spirit is a “Helper,” who assists and fortifies us in becoming the good, humble, truthful people God has always meant us to be.

As I talked about last Sunday preparing us for Pentecost, the Apostles Paul and James didn’t always agree on everything, but they agreed on what constitutes of the right spirit. In his

Letter to the Galatians, Paul declares: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (*Galatians 5:22-23*) With almost identical insight the Apostle James observes that the spirit and wisdom “that comes from above is first of all pure. It is also peace-loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere.” (*James 3:17*)

That’s the spirit whose coming we celebrate at Pentecost and the many weeks that follow as part of its entire season. It’s a compassionate spirit that fills us with a desire to love more deeply and completely as Jesus did. It’s a holy spirit that encourages us to heal, rather than harm; to build up, rather than tear down. It’s a spirit that blesses us with the inspiration and deep, abiding will to seek peace, bridging and transcending even stubborn, longstanding differences –like those we see so terribly and tragically today between Jews and Palestinians.

We may never see tongues of fire dancing above our heads as the apostles and disciples did. Those were emblems of God’s spiritual grace consuming their sin and selfishness and restoring them to a state of sanctity and wholeness. But through our own openness to the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit, which is the Spirit of Christ, I trust that we can each lead more healed, wholesome lives in which love, peace, and gentleness master all sinful selfishness and truly flourish.

You may not remember the fact, but Pentecost started out as a Jewish spring harvest festival that fell *fifty* days after Passover. In fact, that was the source of its very name—which still makes sense for Christians like us who now observe Pentecost fifty days after Easter. In those ancient days, thousands of Jewish pilgrims would descend upon Jerusalem and its temple to celebrate the good harvest. Gathered in Jerusalem with fellow Jews, Jesus’s apostles on the first Christian Pentecost experienced an even greater, more marvelous harvest—yes, the “fruits of the spirit.” That enabled them with fresh courage to pick up the ministry where Jesus had to leave off.

Our Christian religion and church could be called the second harvest and deserve to be deeply appreciated and honored as such. No good, thoughtful Christian should ever be caught deriding “religion” and “church.” Both are the means by which we actualize and express the substance of our faith through word and deed in this world as we seek to be faithful to Jesus Christ.

Pentecost is the longest season of the entire Christian calendar. In the 189 days ahead that comprise the full Pentecost season and take us all the way to Advent and Christmas, may we be those who in Christ’s name give ourselves over to the spirit of his holiness so that working together in the life of the church we bring forth further abundant harvests of goodness, righteousness, and love. To speak in the words of Jesus, by such truly spirited and spiritual fruits may we be known! (*Matthew 7:15-20*) **Amen.**