

I. Advanced Organizer

A. Start today with a moment of reflection:

1. **What does the Holy Spirit look like to you?** When you think of the Holy Spirit, what do you think of? Have you had any personal experiences you would attribute to the Spirit? What were they like?

B. Experiences with the Holy Spirit

1. **I usually say I came to faith in Jesus as a young adult through a series of events which included a few significant moments.** After praying for weeks about where I should go to college, I had some strange experiences: I was touring a certain school and I had this moment where chills ran through my body, shivers down my spine, and I had a sense of divine revelation and direction that that's where I should go. Months later, when a theatre student like me announced in a class that he was beginning a group for other theatre students interested in talking about God, I had the same physical sensations, along with an intuitive sense that this young man was speaking directly to me. The first time I attended his group, and for many times after, without any understanding, I came there and simply wept. I felt filled with a love and acceptance that I had not before experienced: I knew God was close and cared for me. **And this, my new friends interpreted for me was the work of the Holy Spirit.**
2. This began for me a faith journey in what I'd come to learn was a **more "charismatic" part of the Christian church, meaning a set of communities that emphasized the Holy Spirit in a significant way.** I found myself in settings that pursued a very active experience of faith. Some of the expressions of this were strange, even startling to me. But others, particularly giving space in prayer to allow that the Spirit could speak to me personally about what was going on in my life, or through me to someone I prayed for, or speak to me through someone else, this became a fundamental part of what it meant to follow Jesus in my life.
3. In Blue Ocean, the church network we're apart of, we take inspiration from comparative religion scholar Phyllis Tickle as she **describes the four contemporary quadrants of the Christian church:** liturgical, social justice, conservative/Bible focused, and renewals or charismatic. And we see ourselves **ideally circling the center, drawing on the best of all of these**, and I have grown to really value and appreciate the ways I've experienced Jesus centered faith not just being centered in the bottom half of this quadrilateral.
4. It's also made me wonder if two decades or so later after embarking in that active way with Jesus that I described at the beginning, **I wonder if that telling of the story, that I came to faith through what I considered to be this series of "Holy Spirit moments" in college is the only way to see things.** You see, I had actually been baptized as an infant. I'd grown up attending a mainline denominational church, a church Phyllis would put in the upper half of this graphic. Now growing up, it seemed that church was more about connecting with some sort of Sunday Society than anything Divine. I didn't sense God in church. I heard some stories from the Bible. I made some friends, I did community service. The Holy Spirit was probably the part of church I knew the least about. In church, they never really talked about it, except in their liturgy. "we pray in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit..." But what we actually were supposed to understand about the Spirit was a complete mystery. It seemed like something you theoretically assented to as a belief more than anything else.
5. **But all these decades later, I wonder, might the Spirit actually have been working in my life in that context as well?** Perhaps it was less perceptible, more quiet, more subtle.

Expressed through the baptism our church held for me, through the church choir I sang in as a child and the songs I learned there, through the quiet, consistent ways church members showed up for our family through the years, demonstrating through action, that something knits us together. Might that also have been the work of the Spirit?

**C. In the midst of a teaching series, “It’s Complicated”. Paradoxes of Jesus Centered faith.**

1. It’s also Pentecost - the day the church celebrates the giving of the Holy Spirit.
2. **Seems appropriate that today we think about the complexity of the Spirit at work** - in what ways is it very personal? In what ways is it more communal? What is the Spirit’s goal anyway? Just to help us have cool, mystical experiences, or to help us know God loves us? Or is there something more? And if so, what is that?
3. makes sense to take a look at the Pentecost story itself, so we’ll start by doing that.

**II. Pentecost Story - Acts 2**

**A. *When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. 5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” 12 Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”***

**13 Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.”**

1. So let’s stop there for now. As the story goes, these Jesus followers are praying together on a **Jewish holiday called Pentecost**. The festival had been known in previous eras as the Feast of the Harvest, because Jews presented the first-fruits of their wheat harvests there. **“Pentecost” is a Greek word, transliterated into English, that means fiftieth.** This feast fell on the fiftieth day after Passover. It was one of the feasts at which **all the male Jews had to be present at the central sanctuary in Jerusalem**. Jews who lived up to 20 miles from Jerusalem were expected to travel to Jerusalem to attend these feasts. Because Pentecost typically fell, as it does today, in May or June, traveling conditions then made it possible for Jews who lived farther away to visit Jerusalem too. So at this unique time, there are Jews from around the known world gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the harvest.
2. And on that holiday while Jesus’ followers are praying and waiting for this thing Jesus said was gonna happen, they hear this wind - and the way Luke describes it, tongues of fire come to rest above each of them. Now, that’s a bizarre image. Just trying to wrap our heads around it actually happening is pretty challenging.
3. I think the reality is that Luke is using human language to try and describe something that is really beyond ordinary comprehension. So the language and the imagery are strained to capture something so unusual. The closest he can come is that they looked like “tongues of fire”.

4. But what happens next is even more bizarre. Everyone starts praising God in a foreign language. And these aren't just some kinda gibberish nonsense languages, these are actual human languages that were previously unknown to these Jews living in ancient Palestine. And we know this because they make such a ruckus that the tourists hear it and gather to see what the fuss is all about. And when they do, they begin to realize what they're listening to. People are all speaking other languages. The effect is so strange that it causes the cynics in the bunch to sneer and claim they're drunk. Let's go further in the story:

***B. 14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. 15 These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! 16 No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:***

***17 "In the last days, God says,***

***I will pour out my Spirit on all people.***

***Your sons and daughters will prophesy,***

***your young men will see visions,***

***your old men will dream dreams.***

***18 Even on my servants, both men and women,***

***I will pour out my Spirit in those days,***

***and they will prophesy.***

***19 I will show wonders in the heavens above***

***and signs on the earth below,***

***blood and fire and billows of smoke.***

***20 The sun will be turned to darkness***

***and the moon to blood***

***before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.***

***21 And everyone who calls***

***on the name of the Lord will be saved.'***

Skipping ahead a bit, Peter continued to preach the story of Jesus and how the Scriptures pointed to him as the coming Messiah. He ended with these words:

***"...Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah."***

***37 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"***

***38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call."***

***40 With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." 41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.***

So Peter stands up and starts preaching, reminding folks that not only is it too early to really assume these guys are drunk, but that wouldn't make any sense, because they're speaking actual languages, not drunken babble, so something else must be going on. And after

preaching a mini sermon about who this person is that many of these same Jews ganged up on and crucified, folks hearts are touched and three thousand people become followers of Jesus that day.

- III. So this is an amazing story; very dramatic. **But what are we to actually make of it? What does it tell us about the major character it seems to talk about: the Holy Spirit?** What complexity might this story highlight about the Spirit that would be helpful for us to consider as we think about the Spirit in our lives and community?

**A. The Spirit Facilitates Powerful Personal Experiences With God**

1. This story is dramatic right from the beginning. The Holy Spirit shows up and pretty unique things happen. First, there's the noise: like a violent wind, we're told. It's loud! And then there was the visual, something that looks like tongues of fire above each person. And finally there's the dramatic experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit which immediately is demonstrated as these people begins speaking in languages that are previously unknown to them. **All of it indicates power. But what is happening with this power?**
2. **Imagine what it must have been like to experience that for the first time:** you are one of the followers of Jesus who lived life alongside him, you ministered with him. You saw the power of God move through and in him. You saw miracles with your own eyes. You even saw him brutally executed and buried, and you were sure all hope was lost, and then with your own eyes you saw that he came back to life. You touched the wounds with your own hands. You know this stuff is real.
3. But what happens today is something even beyond all of that. **For the first time this isn't happening outside of you.** You're not simply watching the power. **It's happening in you.** Even the image of fire has resonance that makes this point. There has been fire from heaven. When God showed up to lead God's people from bondage into freedom, God led the people with a pillar of fire. When God showed up in the prophet Elijah's show down with the pagan prophets of his day to miraculously light the sacrifice with fire from heaven, again fire demonstrated God's presence.
4. But **something is different about this Pentecost fire.** This fire isn't just something you see out there, **it is something you experience. It is on each person in the room.** You are being filled with the presence of God, and **all that you can do is worship and celebrate this God in ways that are completely beyond anything you've previously expressed or even understood.** It looks different because it is. This is not an everyday occurrence. This is a personal connection with God. The power seems to come, at least in part, to connect each follower of Jesus in a personal way to God.
5. Decades later, John, Jesus' friend, would recall that Jesus had told them that this would be true, that the coming of the Spirit would bring them something that even knowing Jesus in the flesh couldn't give them:
  - a) ***"But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send [her] to you"*** (John 16:7)...***"But when (s)he, the Spirit of truth, comes, (s)he will guide you into all the truth. (S)he will not speak on [her] own; (s)he will speak only what (s)he hears, and (s)he will tell you what is yet to come."*** (John 16:13)
6. Jesus seemed to be teaching his followers and the Pentecost story seems to demonstrate that **the Spirit coming has at least part to do with connecting us in a deeper to God through personal experiences of God's power.** This is the first part of what I want to consider from this passage: is this element that is certainly there of the spirit in the individual: **the Spirit in Me.**

7. **Think about the reflection we did at the beginning.** How many of what came to mind for you when I spoke of the Holy Spirit was about powerful personal experiences like some of the ones I shared? **Now different ones of us might have different kinds of experiences of the Spirit.** Some folks report a lot of experiences, some very few. This could be for a number of reasons: we have different personalities, different wirings, different preferences, different ways of relating to others, and so also God, and that's ok. That diversity of experience reflects the diversity of humanity.
8. Some of the difference also has to do with what we talked about 2 weeks ago - the Now and the Not Yet, the kingdom coming (and in this story we see another major demonstration of that) and the kingdom not yet fully come (which is evident all around us, as it was for the early Jesus followers, as well).
9. What do these experiences look like? Through the decades I've been following Jesus in at least somewhat charismatic circles, I've had lots of opportunities to see people affected by the power of God's spirit, and I've had lots of experiences myself. I'll just describe some common ones:
  - a) Sometimes this power comes in the form of **physical sensation**. A lot of folks seem to sense the Holy Spirit with their bodies. So some people shake (either a little or a lot), some people sway a bit. Some folks it's something small, but their eyelids flutter. Their breathing slows or speeds up. Maybe they feel a warmth or a sense of deep profound peace rest on them. Some get tingles, shivers, that kind of thing. Other people may experience something more dramatic, they might even fall down.
  - b) **For some folks, the coming in power looks like physical healing.** I have heard lots of stories over the years, and have seen some crazy things with my own eyes in this department. Body parts become realigned. Unhealthy lungs restored to full health. Masses inexplicably removed. All of these can be demonstrations of the Spirit's power.
  - c) Often **the presence of the Holy Spirit makes it easier for folks to hear the voice of God**, whether through internal nudges, pictures, or words or sometimes full on visions. Sometimes these are things people feel like God is speaking to them personally. Other times, they might have a sense that God is using them to speak some encouragement to someone else. Either way, these are more examples of the way God's presence can come with power today.
10. But is the spirit just about giving me a good connection to God? Or a sense of spiritual high? Is that all there is? **Or is that connection unto something else?** Seems to bring us to the next point I want to highlight from the story.

**B. The Spirit connects us across difference and facilitates inclusive community.**

1. Here's where we need to ask the question, **"Why the gift of languages?"**
  - a) It's easy to think this is about communication, but it's actually not quite that simple. In this era, people throughout the known world had common languages. Specifically, at this period of the Greco-Roman empire, Greek was the *lingua franca*, or common language. This is why Peter can address the crowds and they all understand him. He's speaking Greek. **It wasn't that these Palestinian Jews needed the gift of languages in order to communicate with folks from all over the world who were gathered there.** There was something deeper, more nuanced, and I would argue, *more important* going on.
  - b) When the Spirit of God came that day and caused people to miraculously praise God in languages that were foreign to them, it went beyond pure communication. By translating praise to all of these native tongues, **the Spirit of God was breaking**

**cultural barriers.** The Spirit of God was affirming very diverse people groups. And the Spirit was doing it by communicating not through the only language people understood, but by choosing the language of their native cultures. She used the language not just of their minds, but of their hearts. The languages they first learned as tiny children. The languages of their dreams. And to hear the praises of this God of the Jews proclaimed not in Hebrew, not in Aramaic, not even in Greek, but in their native tongues would have been a profound experience.

- c) You see, **these are the folks who are the non-majority culture amongst the Jews.** The burden of the cross cultural work for inclusion in the people of God has always been on them. And the fact that these folks have pilgrimaged from far and wide to come to Israel to worship and celebrate this festival with those living in Israel demonstrates that they have been willing to sacrifice and to do that work. Yet in one fell swoop, as the Spirit of God comes and brings worship in every cultural expression, a new era is born. It's as if God has been sensitively, thoughtfully waiting for this particular moment, this first Pentecost after Jesus' resurrection when the most diverse gathering of God followers would be in one space to then come in power, saying to each and every person gathered, **"This move of God, this expansion of God's family, this new day that's dawning, this end-times kind of thing God is building, this includes you.** You are my people, Parthians. You are my people, Medes. You are my people, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, and so on and so on and so on."
  - d) I think the reason Luke gives us such an extended, detailed list of people gathered is because he gets how **revolutionary this is.** The family of God is no longer just about those ethnic Jews in Jerusalem, or Judea. This is a whole new day. It is now a global phenomenon. And God's spirit is doing a work of translating God's good news, translating God's celebration and worship to every cultural language. Because God takes the initiative to speak to the language of our hearts; to the language of our dreams.
- 2. The spirit doesn't just come in power to give us warm fuzzies, or even moments of profound ecstasy. **The Spirit comes in power to connect across difference and facilitate inclusion. The Spirit doesn't just come in me. It comes in Us.**
  - 3. **William Joseph Seymour was an African-American man born in Louisiana in 1870.** His childhood was not an easy one. His parents were former slaves, they were poor, and he grew up in a dangerous time for African-Americans in the south, where the KKK were active and lynchings were all too common.
    - a) As a young adult, **William came to faith in Jesus and experienced a call to ministry.** After surviving a bout of smallpox that left him scarred in the face and blind in one eye, he attended a bible school in Houston, Texas. There he first heard teaching about the power of the Holy Spirit from a man named Charles Parham. Because of strict segregation laws, he was forced to sit outside the classroom full of white students and listen to the teaching from the hallway. Yet despite the significant challenges William Seymour faced, he obediently walked forward into what he felt God was calling him to.
    - b) **In 1906, William was invited to speak at a church in Los Angeles.** When he told the congregation that he believed that when the Holy Spirit came, people could be released to pray in tongues, he was literally locked out of the church. Undeterred, William began preaching to a small group of people in the home he was staying at. Through those meetings, God's spirit was poured out in a wondrous way. People began falling to the floor, speaking in tongues, and experiencing what could be described in no other way but revival.

- c) **Word spread and soon hundreds of people black and white gathered**, spilling out of the house and on to the porch. Prayer meetings took place around the clock. There were so many people, that the floor of the house gave way and the revival meetings had to be moved elsewhere. Under William's leadership, the group moved to a barn on Azuza Street, and there, William Seymour led his ministry through an increasingly more significant outpouring of the Holy Spirit. **This phenomenon would come to be known as the Azuza Street Revival**, and what God began there would impact the church around the globe. The revival gave birth to a number of church movements that believed that God moved today through his Holy Spirit in significant ways, including Pentecostalism, and other charismatic movements.
- d) **William Seymour was used by God in an amazing and unexpected way.** He did not set out to change the history of the people of God. By all reports, William was an extremely humble man, who would preach behind a stack of boxes or with a paper bag over his head, because he didn't want people to be distracted by him, or his wandering blind eye. But God was pleased to use William not only to bring a fresh wave of his Holy Spirit, but to **challenge the cultural biases of the day**. In 1906, the year in which there were more lynchings of black men than any other year in our nation's history, William Seymour became the leader of a movement in the church that would affect myriads of Christian believers across the globe: black, whites, Latino, Asian, and beyond.
- e) The Spirit of God is committed to working across difference and facilitating inclusion.
- 4. **It's not just through the gift of languages that this point is made in Acts 2.** Peter, in his sermon, makes the point in his own way that this is a new day in which **the work of God is being made inclusive in a radical way**. Peter recognizes that the Now and The Not Yet has begun, and he recalls the words of the prophet Joel. He sees the prophecies about the final days coming true, and in those prophecies, all kinds of people have access to being included in what is happening. **The work of God is no longer about one special prophet**. All kinds of people can speak the words of God: the young the old, women and men, queer folks, people of color.
- 5. **The Spirit is the great democratizer.** The Spirit has the power to break down social norms that say the young can't preach, the women can't preach, that queer people can't preach. And it would be the Spirit that convicted Peter and Paul to follow the Spirit's work as she was being poured out not just on observant Jews but on gentiles. The Spirit forced Jesus followers to expand their thinking about who was part of their community - the signs were no longer the cultural markers of Judaism - circumcision, eating kosher, and so on. The signs that God was connecting and including more and more people in the family of God came from the undeniable power of the Spirit.
  - a) The early church seemed to understand that the work of the Spirit wasn't simply the work of individual spiritual self-fulfillment. I think in our individualistic, postmodern culture, we tend to go there - you do you, I'll do me. As long as each of us has what we personally find fulfilling and don't get in the way of other people getting what they want, we're good.
  - b) But clearly the stories of the New Testament, and the letters that describe how the early church practiced their faith point to a faith that understood that **the Spirit was most helpfully expressed and experienced in community**. Yes, the individual experiences were significant for people, especially in the early experience of coming to faith, but the gift of the spirit wasn't just about some sort of personal fulfillment for the

individual. **It was about forging diverse, democratic community- community where the Spirit spoke not just in me but in us.** Where the more of us that shared what we sensed from the Spirit, the closer we were to seeing God.

c) Paul describes this philosophy at one point in 1st Corinthians:

**(1) “What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.”** (1 Cor. 14:26)

d) He seems to say that all of our voices are important, all the unique ways we experience the Divine matter. And the more we share those with one another, the more the community of God is built to reflect the heart of God.

C. So this may all seem like, so what? **What’s so complicated about the spirit both facilitating experiences in me and the spirit bringing connection in us?** I think even if this all seems simple in theory, it can feel complicated in practice.

1. There are **inherent challenges** to leaning into both the Spirit in Me and the Spirit in Us:

- a) The fact that **there is such a variety of experiences with the Spirit, can easily produce misunderstanding, or even conflict. How do we avoid blowing apart** every time we get frustrated because the Spirit seems to be moving in us too differently?
- b) On the other hand, **group think could also be a problem.** We also have to be cautious, particularly in the cultivation of more emotional expressions, it’s easy for emotion to lead experience rather than follow it, and group dynamics can escalate this.
- c) These are both problems that I’ve seen come into play, and could certainly be present any time we’re in spiritual community, particularly a community that values diverse inclusion as directly and openly as we do at Haven.

2. But **there are also unique opportunities**, that make enduring the challenges worthwhile:

- a) All the complicatedness of this reminds us that **God is actually more committed to creating safe, diverse community than even we are.** God has been about that from the beginning and has been progressively working throughout history toward that aim. **The Spirit is God’s gift in the project**, to say we don’t have to do it alone.
- b) To tap into and embody the tension of the spirit not just in me but in us, reminds us **that the universe is bigger than our little spiritual lives.** We are a part of something bigger, more universal, more hopeful. And **the Spirit is still doing this work as powerfully today as she did on Pentecost:** just yesterday people around the world were awestruck hearing the Good News of God’s inclusive love demonstrated through Jesus as a black preacher spoke in a super old white church to a royal interracial couple. **The Spirit is still speaking new cultural languages and breaking social barriers, and we, Haven get to be a part of God’s cosmic project of creating a more inclusive, welcoming, spiritual community that connects the Divine with the whole human family.** Amen.

D. End by inviting the spirit...