

Receive the Holy Spirit

May 24, 2026

Acts 2:1-21

John 20:19-23

There's a reason why this morning's story about the house finch guarding his treasure had him guarding... whatever it was. I think we have a similar problem with the Holy Spirit. We know it's valuable. We know it's important. We know it's something to embrace. But...

What is it? When we receive the Holy Spirit, what do we receive?

It doesn't help that we have two Scriptures offered by the editors of the Revised Common Lectionary for Pentecost with, shall we say, rather different ideas of how the Holy Spirit was given to Jesus' disciples after his resurrection. The one we probably know better is the Pentecost account from Acts of the Apostles. Jesus had been raised but he had also departed, promising his followers the gift of the Holy Spirit. About a hundred and twenty of them kept close to one another in Jerusalem, and many if not all of them got together to observe the Shavuot holiday together. Shavuot was one of the three holidays that attracted Jews to Jerusalem in the first century, along with Sukkot in the fall and Passover earlier in the spring. In fact, the Greek name Pentecost stands for the fifty days between Passover and Shavuot.

Whatever they'd planned – which was probably Temple worship at some point in the day – the Holy Spirit changed their plans with a rush like a violent wind, the signs of tongues on their heads, then speaking different tongues, and being so successful in proclaiming God's inviting mercy that their community grew 2,500%.

As Margaret Aymer writes at Working Preacher, "The Holy Spirit proves not to be a quiet, heavenly dove but, rather, a violent force that blows the church into being (Acts 2:41–47). That church consists mainly of immigrants, people of different languages and cultures with different mother tongues (Acts 2:5, 9–12, 14). To these, the message goes forth: a message of the coming of the day of the Lord, full of heavenly portents and prophetic women, slaves, and men. But in the midst of the chaos of Pentecost rests an anchor: Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

In contrast, we have John's account of the gift of the Holy Spirit. The setting is much different: the evening of Easter Day itself. Just a few of the disciples were gathered in a private, even locked space. As Cody J. Sanders writes at Working Preacher, "John's scene is an intimate proximity of bodies and breath, fright giving way to peace, signs of death bespeaking new life, and a renewed mission for those whose world had seemingly come to an end."

On the one hand: Close friends gathered alone. The gentle breeze of a human breath. A promise of forgiveness.

On the other hand: Close friends gathered, then driven out into the crowds. The roar of a mighty wind. And... a promise of forgiveness.

One of my convictions about the Holy Spirit is that the Spirit's manifestations simply aren't predictable. I recall Elijah's journey to the mountain of the Law, where he found that the great events of wind, fire, and earthquake were not full of the Spirit, but the "sound of sheer silence" was. I recall that the Spirit visited Jeremiah when he thought he was too young and Mary when she was not a married adult. I recall that the Spirit came to foreigners, not just foreigners, to a Roman officer's household, and that the Spirit transformed someone fully convinced that the Jesus movement must be ended.

There are so many others. The Spirit doesn't do what I expect it to do, or what you expect it to do, or what Elijah, Moses, Jeremiah, Mary, Simon Peter, or the Apostle Paul expected it to do.

So what does mark the Holy Spirit?

I'd have to say that the first sign is probably disruption. There's that unpredictability again, but it's also because the Holy Spirit isn't that interested in changing things that are good and right and true. The Holy Spirit intervenes when things are going badly, wrongly, and falsely – or at least when they could be substantially better. The Pentecost story from Acts is disruptive from start to finish, changing the little Jesus community's plans not just for the day but for the rest of their lives.

John's account is gentler, but it's disruptive, too. This was Jesus' first appearance to the disciples on Easter, and in John's gospel it took two more visits to shake them out of the notion that they were going to go on with life as usual. When you hear Jesus say, "Receive the Holy Spirit" here, you should probably also hear what he said in the next chapter: "Feed my sheep."

What else marks the Holy Spirit?

Jesus' first words to his friends as he appeared among them was, "Peace be with you." A mark of the Holy Spirit is peace.

If that seems inconsistent with disruption, Jesus spoke those words in the aftermath of state-authorized violence: his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. He lived, and we live, in an age where wars tragically rage among nations and within nations. By the time John's Gospel was written, Roman armies had swept over the ground Jesus walked and destroyed the Jerusalem Temple.

I'd argue that the world needs some serious disruption to live in peace. As Angela N. Parker writes at Working Preacher, "Jesus has given us a double portion of peace to breathe again. Let

us be Jesus followers that transform society instead of being fearful disciples who are holding our collective breath.”

What else marks the Holy Spirit?

Forgiveness and inclusion.

In John, Jesus’ final words were that his followers had been given the power to forgive. I grant you that’s a power you may not want. It’s too big for most of us. Personally, I’m concerned that if I’m responsible for forgiveness there are some people who definitely need it who aren’t going to get it.

Forgiveness is a simple concept. When somebody does something that brings harm to someone else, which might be another person, or God, or both, then that person is obligated to make things right. In religious terms, they have to repent, they have to make restitution, and they have to reform their future behavior. If they do that, if they apologize and try to correct the harm they did, the person they injured has the opportunity to forgive.

Human beings do that a lot. They do things, and then they say, “I’m sorry,” and they try to fix it, and the person they harmed says, “It’s all right.”

Part of our understanding about sin and forgiveness is that God gets involved. God doesn’t want people harming one another, so injuring another person is also a sin against God. When we apologize to the person we harmed, we also need to apologize to God.

Jesus was clear that apologizing to God alone is not enough. In the Sermon on the Mount, he told his hearers that when bringing an offering to God seeking forgiveness, they needed to first make things right with the people they’d harmed. It’s important to apologize to God, but Jesus made clear that that wouldn’t have any impact if there’d been no apology to the people involved.

The current affection for non-apology apologies, “I’m sorry if I offended anyone,” and the assertion that “God has forgiven me, so I don’t need to make things right with anyone else,” are both bad theology and bad for human relationships.

When Jesus told his disciples that they had the power to forgive, he told them that they had the power to help people through their repentance to others and come to repentance to God.

They still need to take the steps themselves, however. Forgiveness without repentance and restitution isn’t forgiveness. It’s just license. Permission to cause harm.

Simon Peter, in quoting from the prophet Joel, made clear that the gift of the Holy Spirit would lead to salvation. He made it clear that many of the restrictions people usually apply to human

societies would not be honored by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit comes to young and old, men and women, rich and poor, respected and discounted.

The Holy Spirit comes even to you and to me, who would probably prefer less disruption in life, who would like peace but aren't sure what a world at peace looks like, and who are somewhat anxious to hear that God pays attention to whether we forgive someone or not. The Holy Spirit comes so that we get shaken from our complacency, so that we no longer accept the violence and coercion so common in the world. The Holy Spirit comes to give us courage to forgive when people apologize to us, and help them find their way to their further forgiveness by God:

So that all the world might be saved.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson