

**“The Holy Spirit Acts:
THE SPIRIT-LED COMMUNITY”**

Acts 2:42-47

***The apostolic community gives us the model
for the church today.***

A sermon preached by
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One of the most successful Olympic athletes in the history of the games is a woman named Jenny Thompson. Now an anesthesiologist, she was an Olympic swimmer and competed in the Olympics four times, from 1992 to 2004. Jenny Thompson won more Olympic medals than any American female athlete in the history of the modern Olympics. She won twelve medals in total, and eight of them were gold. However, the interesting thing is, all eight of Jenny Thompson's Olympic gold medals, and 10 of the 12 overall, were won in team events—relays with other swimmers. This fact has caused some people to question whether Jenny Thompson should really be ranked with the outstanding Olympians of all time. I think she should, *especially* because she has won so many team events! She had to be great even to get on the team, but her true greatness became apparent when she worked in community to achieve the victory.¹ Victories may even be sweeter when you share them with a team.

Our text today comes as the Holy Spirit is assembling the team to take the Gospel to the world. Pentecost has just happened. We talked about Pentecost last week. Jesus promised the disciples that they would receive power, so they waited and prayed in Jerusalem for ten days. On the Day of Pentecost, in the middle of a major Jewish festival, the room where they were gathered to pray was filled with the sound of a rushing wind, and tongues of fire danced on their heads, and they all spoke the gospel in languages they had not learned, so that everyone in Jerusalem for the festival heard the good news in his own language. Peter stood up and gave a sermon, and 3,000 souls were added to the church that very first day. The team was coming together.

The coming of the Holy Spirit with power created a new community out of the ragtag group that had followed Jesus in his earthly career. Now they were suddenly over three thousand strong. The Holy Spirit had given birth to a church, and it was a big, healthy baby. Immediately, led by the Holy Spirit, this fledgling apostolic church began four faith practices that are still the core of our life together.

First there was the **teaching of the apostles**. The ones who had been with Jesus began to teach everything that they could remember he said.

Then there was the **fellowship**. Just like now, these new Christians loved to get together. They were strengthened for this new life by spending time with their fellow believers.

Third was the **breaking of bread**. Not only does this refer to sharing meals together (something else we still like to do), but it also means worshipping together. Every Christian worship service in the early days was a communion service, and the early Christians didn't just eat a bite of bread dipped in juice; they had a full meal—bread, cheese, olives, wine—it was a feast to celebrate the goodness of God and the sacrifice of Christ.

Finally, the apostolic church joined together in **prayer**. Communicating with God was top priority, because it was his Holy Spirit that was building this community. The construction crew had to keep in touch with the Builder so they would know how to proceed.

Teaching, fellowship, worship, and prayer—this is what the apostolic church did. This is what we do when we follow the Spirit's leading today. Can we expect the same results? Let's look at what happened to the disciples.

Acts says, "*Awe came upon everyone.*"² They knew that what they were experiencing was important and extraordinary. They were seeing the action of God the Holy Spirit in their midst. Many of them had witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus, his resurrection, the ascension into heaven, and they had been there when the Holy Spirit rushed the room on Pentecost. Who wouldn't be going, "Wow! This is incredible! What an awesome God we have!"

I think sometimes we forget to be impressed by God. Maybe we haven't had a mountaintop experience lately, or maybe the burdens of life have just weighed us down. That's why it's important to get out in God's creation. On our recent vacation we saw the mountains and a great waterfall and the ocean. We got our reservoir of awe filled back up. Or hold a baby. Or sing a great song. Or watch somebody who is just discovering faith. Then you remember, our God is an awesome God!

The second result of the Holy Spirit working in the apostolic church was a **community of love**. Acts says, “*All who believed were together and had all things in common.*”³ They loved each other so much, they didn’t even care any more about their material possessions; they just shared whatever God had given them. They worshipped in the Temple together, then they went home and ate together “*with glad and generous hearts.*”⁴ These were the original Happy Meals two thousand years before McDonalds. Even the pagan historians of the period commented how the distinguishing characteristic of the Christians was their love for one another.

When the Holy Spirit is in the church today, it continues to be a community of love. The Spirit’s presence doesn’t mean there is an absence of conflict, but there is a reconciling spirit in the place. What we’re about is so much bigger than “me” and “mine” and “my way”; that stuff just doesn’t matter. Loving each other and sharing our resources, we are striving together to find God’s way in our lives and in our church. That’s the Spirit building the community.

The final result of the work of the Holy Spirit is **additions**. People want to be a part of a Spirit-led church. A growing church is the work of the Holy Spirit. We want to be a part of that love and awe and power. Acts says, “*And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*”⁵ When the Holy Spirit gets loose in a place, you can’t keep the people away.

Any revival movement is the work of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes you just see the Spirit break out in random places at random times. The Methodist movement in England, of course, comes to mind. The Great Awakenings on the frontier of America changed the course of our history. Holy Spirit revivals have broken out in the last half century at Asbury College in Kentucky, Pensacola, Florida, and Toronto, Canada. Could Fort Smith, Arkansas, be added to that list? When the Holy Spirit is leading the way, people are added to the community.

So with the Spirit’s help, we are called to build that kind of church right here in Fort Smith: a church that relies on the teaching of the Word, the fellowship of believers, the worship of God, and the prayers of the people. We want a church where

there is an atmosphere of awe, a community of love, and new people finding a church home here all the time. Don't you want to be a part of that?

This is what it means to be a Spirit-led community. A basic component of the Christian faith is the fellowship of believers. You can't do Christianity without the church. John Wesley led the Methodist revival as a clinic in community. He wrote: "Solitary religion is not to be found there. 'Holy Solitaries' is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than Holy Adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness."⁶ Christianity is a team sport, a group exercise.

This need for community goes as deep as our understanding of God. Today is Trinity Sunday, always celebrated the first Sunday after Pentecost, because finally we have all the actors on the stage: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I'm not going to attempt to explain the Trinity this morning; I doubt I could anyway. Suffice it to say that the Trinity is one of the fundamental beliefs of the church from the beginning, and it is a deep mystery. The point today is that even our idea of God is a team—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God can't even do God without a group effort! So why do we think we can go it alone in our understanding and practice of faith?

We experienced the power of community on Tuesday this week, after three big oak trees uprooted and fell in our back yard. One of them crashed into our den, right where Carey had been sitting moments before. It was scary, and it did extensive damage, and we're going to be spending the summer living somewhere else. But thank God Carey and Zoe, our little dog, were not hurt, our insurance is good, and those dangerous trees are gone for good.

Within minutes of the disaster at our house, the community began to show up. Our neighbors came to check on us and hooked us up with a tree service, who came within an hour. Some of our church staff must have seen the way I left the church; they came to help. Calls and texts began to come in, checking on us and offering help. Before the evening was over, a church member had volunteered her house for the summer so we would have a place to live. It was a terrible day, but it was

an awesome experience of the wonderful community we have here.

The experience of community is one of our basic human needs, but oddly enough, our fellowship, our togetherness, has been under attack for some time. The general trend of culture has been away from community and toward individualism. Technology has allowed us to retreat to our isolated spaces. Political, racial, and economic differences have caused divisions. The church has lost credibility and influence in our increasingly secularized society, and “organized religion” is avoided by people who claim to be “spiritual but not religious.” In the last year, the pandemic forced most churches to cancel services, ministries, and activities. People have long ago lost the habit of attendance at church and Sunday School, and our sense of community has suffered.

The question I have been hearing lately is, “How can we get our church back?” Meaning how can we get our attendance back up to pre-COVID levels? It’s the question on the mind of every pastor in America and many of our laity. If our church is still important, why aren’t people coming back, and how can we get them back? I have four answers to that question.

First, the church never left. Even though we suspended in-person gatherings for a while, the church never closed. All year long we were busy in ministry—doing church and small groups online, connecting with people by Zoom, text, email, and phone, doing more in community missions, especially to feed people, than we have ever done before, supporting the church financially with our gifts better than the year before the pandemic. The community of faith at FUMC was strong during the pandemic and will continue to be that way.

That being said, the post-pandemic church is going to be different than what came before. We will continue to have our worship services streamed online and available to watch anytime. Some classes will be done by Zoom, because you can be involved from wherever you are. My new class in the Old Testament has people from three states already signed up. The new church will not look like the old church.

So we need to do two things. Be patient. It’s going to take a while to build the church back up. Not everyone is comfortable

yet coming back. People have lost the habit of coming to church. It will take a while to get back in the habit. And some won't get back in the habit, but they will still be engaged with our church, through online options, mission opportunities, and financial support. We who like to count noses need to get used to that.

Finally and most importantly, we need to trust God. This is God's church. The Holy Spirit is in our faith community as surely as the Spirit was in the apostolic church. If we follow Jesus and love people and tell the good news, we are going to be the church, and God is going to bless our ministry, no matter what it looks like. I don't believe in any way that God sent the pandemic on the world, but I do believe God can use the pandemic to renew the church, to reset our ministry, to redefine our priorities, to reclaim our mission, and leave behind some of the old stuff that was holding us back. The wind of the Spirit is blowing strong in the church right now; I don't have time to tell you all the God things I see happening almost daily. I know we can trust God to be with us in this time of transition.

Friday morning we had a celebration of life for Peggy Udouj. I was visiting with one of her grandsons-in-law, who was singing in the service. He mentioned that he was from Tyler, Texas. I asked him if he was familiar with Marvin Memorial United Methodist Church in Tyler, because it's a big church, and I have a friend who used to be a pastor there. This young man, Jeff, said they did not attend there, but oh, that church knew how to love their neighbors. That were making an impact on Tyler, and his friends who went there really loved that church. I thought that was a great witness about a vital community of faith from a man who didn't even go there.

And it made me wonder. What if someone from Fort Smith who did not attend our church were asked about First United Methodist? Would they say, "Oh, I don't go there, but they really know how to love their neighbors. And my friends who go there really love that church!" Do they say that about us? That's the kind of witness I want. That's the kind of team I want to be on. That's the kind of Spirit-led community God is calling us to be.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jenny_Thompson.

² Acts 2:43.

³ Acts 2:44.

⁴ Acts 2:46.

⁵ Acts 2:47.

⁶ John Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), Preface, page viii. https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/blog/no-holiness-but-social-holiness#_ftn2.