

**Romans 8:1-17      John 14:8-17, 25-27; Acts 2:1-13**

**June 9, 2019    Day of Pentecost**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **WAITING FOR THE SPIRIT TO MOVE US**

***Let us pray: Come, Holy Spirit, and fill our hearing with the fire of your call to the church and with the mystery of our faith. Amen.***

You may have heard this one before, but it's a good story: A storm descends on a small town, and the downpour soon turns into a flood. As the waters rise, the local preacher kneels in prayer on the church porch, surrounded by water. By and by, one of the townsfolk comes up the street in a canoe.

"Better get in, Preacher. The waters are rising fast."

"No," says the preacher. "I have faith in the Lord. He will save me."

Still the waters rise. Now the preacher is up on the balcony, wringing his hands in supplication, when another guy zips up in a motorboat.

"Come on, Preacher. We need to get you out of here. The levee's gonna break any minute."

Once again, the preacher is unmoved. "I shall remain. The Lord will see me through."

After a while the levee breaks, and the flood rushes over the church until only the steeple remains above water. The preacher is up there, clinging to the cross, when a helicopter descends out of the clouds, and a state trooper calls down to him through a megaphone.

"Grab the ladder, Preacher. This is your last chance."

Once again, the preacher insists the Lord will deliver him.

And, predictably, he drowns.

A pious man, the preacher goes to heaven. After a while he gets an interview with God, and he asks the Almighty, "Lord, I had unwavering faith in you. Why didn't you deliver me from that flood?"

God shakes his head. "What did you want from me? I sent you two boats and a helicopter."<sup>1</sup>

I wonder if the church isn't a lot like that preacher many times. We piously claim, "We have faith in the Lord. He will save us. The Lord will see us through. The Lord will deliver." Then, when our best-laid plans don't work out or we wring our hands because things aren't the way they used to be in the church or we are stymied as to what to do so we don't do anything, God says, "What did you want from me? I sent you the prophets. I made a covenant with you to be your God. I gave you my Word. Because I loved you so much, I sent you my only Son. And last, but not least, I sent you an-

other Advocate to be with you forever and to give you the power to do the works that Jesus was doing while he was on earth.”

On this Day of Pentecost, when we celebrate God’s gift of the Holy Spirit to the church, I’d like for us to think about two ideas that, at first glance, seem to be at odds with one another: on the one hand, waiting on the Spirit to move us and, on the other hand, being active for God.

As Jesus was saying goodbye to his disciples just before he died, he made them an astounding promise: “Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.” (John 14:12) However, Jesus didn’t leave them on their own after wishing them “Good luck!” with their ministry. Instead, Jesus made another powerful promise to them: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” (John 14:15-17)

The disciples might have been frightened at the idea that they would be asked and expected to do the things Jesus had been doing, and even greater things. Then again, they might have been rarin’ to get started right away with their ministry. Either way, they needed to wait on the Spirit to move them. And that’s exactly what Jesus told them to do, as we read in Acts 1, the prelude to the story of Pentecost in Acts 2. Luke writes, “While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. . . So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’” (Acts 1:4, 6-8) And so they waited for the Spirit to move them. But their waiting was an *active* waiting, for Luke tells us “All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.” (Acts 1:14)

St. Augustine, the 4th and 5th century Christian theologian who became the bishop of Hippo in North Africa, wrote, “Without God we cannot; without us, He will not.” In my reading for today’s sermon, I came across any interesting article about Augustine’s bold claim. Here is what the author said (and it’s immediately applicable to the life and ministry of our congregation):

“Augustine was getting at the constant tightrope we walk. It is the tightrope of Divine-human interface. It is the intersection of God’s Sover-

eignty and our responsibility. It is the converging of supernatural power and human effort. And it is a rather messy, mysterious place to live.

“How hard do I need to work?

“How active must I be for faithfulness?

“What does God do and what do I do?

“Does my effort even matter?

“Is it mainly up to me to be faithful and diligent and disciplined?”

The author’s blog was actually about Jesus’ words in the next chapter of John (15), where Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) But, since these words of Jesus come right after his promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit and his commission to his disciples to continue his work in his physical absence, it’s worth noting that the presence and power of the Spirit of the Risen Christ are vitally important for our ministry and work as the Wallace Presbyterian Church.

Here are the blogger’s reflections on Augustine’s idea about God’s sovereignty and our responsibility: “In our time, I think we are in the pendulum shift that is well on the side of human effort and not understanding the sovereign, divine, empowering side. We have the tendency to look for new techniques, methodologies, formulas, and skills that will ‘make the difference’ in my ministry or work place. We do not naturally think of nurturing and deepening our relationship with God when things are not going well.”

Jesus told his disciples to wait for the Spirit to move, which agrees with his teaching, “apart from me you can do nothing.” The blogger’s comments are helpful for us to hear on this day when we celebrate the Holy Spirit and wonder what the Spirit means for our lives, our church, and our mission. He writes, “Without Jesus . . . nothing! So, if I decide to work twice as hard, but without Jesus, two x nothing = a bigger amount of NOTHING. That is, to say it mildly, a bit of a wake up call. And it supports what Augustine said in the first half of his sentence:

Without God we cannot . . .

“But Jesus also said that you and I are the ones to bear much fruit that lasts. We are the ones responsible to bear fruit. God isn’t the one who is doing it. We are the ones responsible to do ministry, not God. We who follow Jesus are the ones who do the work of service. This is the second half of Augustine’s spiritual equation:

. . . without us, He will not.”<sup>2</sup>

The other day I went to the Dollar General on Highway 117 to buy some notebooks. As I turned into the store’s parking lot, I noticed the church sign at what used to be the Western Sizzlin’ next door. The sign is for the Church of Pentecostal Gathering and it read, “Holy Ghost Revival Sister Kathy Boone Wed to Sun 7 PM.” That got me thinking about Pente-

cost and the Holy Spirit and our church and our ministry and Jesus' promise of another Advocate and his commission/promise that whoever believes in him will do the work that he does and even greater works.

I think I know what is meant by a "Holy Ghost Revival." Just the same, I thought I would Google the phrase and see what pops up. I found a dated advertisement for a Holy Ghost Revival that took place in April 2018 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The details included the name of the leader and went on to say, "There will be powerful preaching, teaching, and demonstration of the Holy Ghost. The hearts of many will be touched and changed forever by the Spirit of God. This is one event you do not want to miss."<sup>3</sup> The event was scheduled to last six days.

I started wondering if what we *really* need to do in the church is pay attention to and open ourselves up to God's Holy Spirit who is already and always present and at work among us. In a way, the Holy Spirit is like the canoe, the motorboat, and the helicopter. God has already provided what we need to do what God calls us to do as a church. The question is whether or not we're willing to accept God's gift that he sends our way, to wait for the Spirit to move us.

There are at least two dangers in waiting on the Spirit to move us. First, we might end up sitting around not doing much of anything or expecting God to do everything. Second, when the Spirit does move us, we might resist — sometimes mightily — going where the Spirit wants to lead us and doing what the Spirit wants us to do.

In the past few weeks, we've seen the humbling and heart-breaking pictures of the damage done by the tornadoes that ravaged the middle part of our country. Around here, we're all too familiar with the power of the wind. I'm not equating God's Holy Spirit with the destructive winds of tornadoes and hurricanes, but there is certainly a sense of power and change and freshness and newness that comes with the Holy Spirit, if only we're willing to open the windows and the doors of our lives and our church and let God's Holy Spirit blow through.

What I'm trying to say is, waiting for the Spirit to move us can't be a passive activity. We must be ready to respond in faith when the Holy Spirit calls us to be a part of the new things God is always doing. Waiting for the Spirit to move doesn't mean waiting for the Holy Spirit to do everything on our behalf. Instead, waiting for the Spirit to move us means being open to God's life-giving power and opportunities to do Jesus' work here on earth.

Here's how we affirm our faith in God's Holy Spirit is "The Brief Statement of Faith" of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Notice how the Holy Spirit enables and empowers us to do ministry and mission.

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,*

*everywhere the giver and renewer of life.*

*The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,*

*sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,  
and binds us together with all believers  
in the one body of Christ, the church.  
The same Spirit  
who inspired the prophets and apostles  
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,  
engages us through the Word proclaimed,  
claims us in the waters of baptism,  
feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,  
and calls women and men to all ministries of the church.  
In a broken and fearful world  
the Spirit gives us courage  
to pray without ceasing,  
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,  
to unmask idolatries in church and culture,  
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,  
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.  
In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,  
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks  
and to live holy and joyful lives,  
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,  
praying, Come, Lord Jesus!  
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

***Let us pray: Lord God, through Christ you have given us peace  
that the world cannot give. Let your Spirit of truth abide with  
us so that we may live in hope, grow in faith, and keep your  
commandments of love.***

***You sent the Spirit of truth to guide us into the way, the  
truth, and the life of Christ. Let your Spirit, our Advocate, guide  
us still— preserving us from judgment, protecting us from sin,  
and leading us into righteousness, so that we may testify to the  
good news: fullness of life and joy for all; through Jesus Christ  
our Savior and in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen.***

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This version of the joke is taken from Troy DuFrene, "Two Boats and an Helicopter: Thoughts on Stress Management," *Psychology Today* May 4, 2009 at [www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com).

<sup>2</sup>Brian K. Rice, "Without God . . . (Thoughts from Augustine, not to mention Jesus and Paul) October 6, 2009 at LeadershipConneXtions at [www.lcityepad.com](http://www.lcityepad.com).

<sup>3</sup>[www.revival.com/e/Tulsa-Oklahoma#](http://www.revival.com/e/Tulsa-Oklahoma#)