

# “The Promise”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – June 6, 2021*

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 145:1-13

Rev. John Wahl

Acts 2:37-47

“What should we do?” This is a question that not only many of the graduates that we celebrate today are asking; but that each of us within the Christian community keeps coming back to. When presented with obstacles or opportunities – and in the presence of God’s grace – we ponder our next steps; the right move for the moment; and how to best deploy the gifts we have been given.

Today’s New Testament reading brings to a conclusion the story of Pentecost; where the Holy Spirit is experienced powerfully not only by the followers of Jesus, but also Jews from all over the ancient world who had gathered together in Jerusalem. Peter explains to them that what they are experiencing is the gift of God’s Spirit, now poured on them by the risen Christ. And in response, thousands of people repented, were baptized, and became part of the Christian community; thus, we get a glimpse into what life in the early church looked like.

The chapter begins with a hodge-podge of Jews from mixed backgrounds, but ends with a unified, integrated community that expressed their concern for each other by sharing what they had so that no one went without; every need was met. The offering of time, talent, and treasures – the trinity of possessions that we so often speak about in the church – represents a concern for the common good. We may imagine that Luke is painting a rather sunny picture of this moment in time; not because these things did not occur but because they were so fleeting. “The real questions,” claims Willie James Jennings, “are not whether this holy communalism, this sacred sociality, could or would be operative, be practical in this ancient world or any world, but what it must have been like to feel the powerful pull of the life of our savior, and what energy did it take to resist the Holy Spirit, to slow down this pull enough to withhold themselves and their possessions from divine desire.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Willie James Jennings, Acts in “Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible”

Beyond the matter of selling and sharing what they had, the early church is also marked by study, fellowship, prayer and praise. When the people inquire, “What should we do?” it is not a dour adherence to a stringent requirement, it is accompanied by praising God. What was at stake here was not just the giving up of possessions, but the giving up of each person – one by one – as the Spirit gave direction. They were becoming the church, the body of Christ,

What is far more dangerous than any plan of shared wealth or fair distribution of goods and services, Jennings says, “is a God who dares impose on us divine love. Such love will not play fair. In the moment we think something is ours, or our people’s, God will demand that we sell it, or give it away, or offer more of it in order to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, or shelter the homeless; using it to create the bonds of shared life.”

And so, as much as we might like to map out our answers to the question, “What should we do?” God often interrupts those plans and surprises us with new options and pathways. Our eyes may be focused squarely in one direction, but then something else comes into our field of vision, causing us to reconsider where we are going, what we need, and how to respond. After all, what we should do as one part of the body is contingent on the functioning of the whole.

The Pentecost story reminds us of the powerful action of God’s Spirit to bring about change: coming upon the people like a blowing wind. The community of faith that is formed – and the level to which they live out principles of hospitality, sharing, and praise – points not just to themselves, but to the risen Christ that they worship and serve. Acts describes a community of faith that operates in the power of God’s Spirit. The virtues of justice and mutuality are not the accomplishments of extra-ordinary people; they are signs of the Spirit within a community of people who understand themselves as united in purpose and identity – not a dispersed collection of individual churchgoers.<sup>2</sup>

In this final section of Acts 2, Peter speaks about God’s promise which, he says to those in the newly gathered faith community, “is for you, for your children, and for those who are far away.” This promise is rooted not only in what God has done in the past but continues to do – like the movement of the Spirit’s wind – in our midst. This is a living promise; adapted to each – and every – new situation, opportunity, or challenge. It is for today, and every new day.

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<sup>2</sup> Matt Skinner from *WorkingPreacher.org*

The promise is for salvation: the reassurance that God's people will be preserved and will thrive. The message of Pentecost – as the culmination of what Jesus's life, death, resurrection, and ascension set in motion – is that God's salvation has arrived in its fullness; it is certain and has been made complete. God has neither forgotten nor abandoned God's people.

Sometimes, this promise is best revealed through the actions of the church: such as in the sharing and praising of the community that is described here in Acts. Sometimes, because it is made up of flawed human beings, the church falls short of this ideal. We fail to hear the cries of those in need, stand divided rather than united, or do not see how our gifts can be put to use.

But with each new day – and in every new challenge and opportunity – we ask, yet again, “What shall we do?” Sometimes, this question serves as an invitation for God's Spirit to move us in completely new directions; other times, it reminds us of previous commitments to the common good. Our congregation's return to in-person gatherings offers us the chance to reconsider our connections to one another and the ways we share what we have been given in praise to God; and to remember God's gracious concern for our children and for those who are far away.

For us, as individuals and as a body, what does the promise of salvation look like, today? In what ways can we advocate for justice, be constant in prayer, united in fellowship, and share both who we are and what we have been given? These are good questions for a vital, living and breathing church – on being re-gathered, re-formed and renewed – to ponder. May God's Spirit blow among us now with the promise of God for a life of praise, in mutuality and service, and in its fullness. Amen.