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First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
June 4, 2017 Pentecost
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To EACH

Numbers 11:24-30 NRSV 24So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. 25Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again. 26Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. 27And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." 28And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, stop them!" 29But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" 30And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

1 Corinthians 12:3-7 NRSV 3Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit. 4Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; 6and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

These are not the scriptures we are used to hearing on Pentecost. Even though the lectionary, that set of weekly readings used by many churches around the world, names these as among the four scriptures for Pentecost, we're more used to that stirring rendition of the Spirit's visitation as it is told in the Book of Acts. [\[Play video\]](#) Even though we rightly name this story as the "birthday of the Church," it is but a very dramatic example of what God has always been about and continues to be about – which is gifting people with what they need, creating something where there was nothing before, offering new possibilities and new life and new ways of being. That, indeed, is what God has always done and continues to do – down to this very morning in this very place among this very people.

The story that is told in our first reading for today is instructive in these regards. But first, some background. Moses, after successfully negotiating the release of the

Hebrew people from Egypt, after travail and tragedy, has begun to lead the people toward the Promised Land. But at this point in the story, weeks or months into that exodus journey, Moses is tired. He's started complaining about the people. The people are complaining about him. They've all lost the first rush of excitement and adrenalin that powered their flight out of Egypt and have now settled in to the trudging drudgery of a day-to-day exhausting journey.

And what does God do? The Spirit is sent to seventy other folks whom can now assist Moses in the thousand-and-one demands and tasks for leading this band of weary and disgruntled travelers, seventy folks who can now help call into being new life, and new energy, and new hope, and new possibility. But God also does something else, and it's my favorite part of this story: the Spirit is sent to two other men who weren't a part of that group of seventy, with the fun-to-say names of Eldad and Medad. They too, apparently, had begun to do some good work amidst the encampment. The story says they were "prophesying" and in the Biblical tradition that doesn't mean to be fortune-telling the future. No, it means that they were gifted by the Spirit in helping folks make sense of things, understand their lives better, figure out how to deal with something that was bothering them, helping them to see how God was at work in their lives. But there's always one tattle-tale in every bunch, it seems, and in this story the tattle-runs to Moses and complains that Eldad and Medad hadn't been specifically authorized, they weren't following the rules, they didn't have the proper credentials. Did you ever have one of those folks in your elementary school classroom? The tattle-tale who was always the one to tell one someone who was breaking some rule, usually the more minor the better. Good teachers know not to reward such behavior, and Moses is a good teacher; you can almost hear him sigh in exasperation as he tells the tattle-tale young man, *"Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!"*

So what do we learn from this story? Two things, I suggest. First, sometimes the Spirit gifts *you* precisely by gifting **other** people in your life. We all know what it is like to feel beleaguered and harried, too much to do and too little time to do it. Or, more urgently, we all know what it is like to have a problem that is bedeviling us, that won't go away, that eats at us and nags at us and maybe even scares us. Moses found himself in that position and so do we sometimes. And what God does for Moses is what God does for you and me: sends the Spirit to other people in our lives who can help us. The problem that seemed insoluble begins to be not so fearsome when God sends us someone who has a new perspective on what is troubling us. That sense of despair we sometimes find ourselves faced with when the world around us seems hell-bent on hurting those whom Christ told us to care about is lightened and we can find new hope when God sends the Spirit to other folks who can help us find our resolve again. Those moments when our own faith may come hard and doubts snuggle up to our souls are those moments when, as the late Disciples preacher Fred Craddock once said, the work of the Spirit allows someone else to believe on our behalf until we can again find our center. All of these things are the work of the Spirit Whom God sent to Moses, sent to those band of scared and anxious folks in Jerusalem so long ago, and continues to send to those who can help.

And what's the second thing the story tells us? That the Spirit is always sent to us and to others in order that we might DO something. Put negatively, the Spirit doesn't come to us or other just so we can **feel** something. Now, there is no question that folks can and should find a deep peace, a deep contentment in their personal relationships with God. That line from the old Eagles' song – "I've got a peaceful easy feeling, and I know you won't let me down" – could be written about a believer's sense of his or her relationship with God. God is the One indeed in whom we can have a feeling of trust for it is indeed true that God doesn't let us down. But the Spirit is not simply and only

given that we might have such a feeling, such a sense. No, those seventy elders with Moses, along with Eldad and Medad, and that crowd in Jerusalem were given the Spirit in order to DO something. For those elders and Eldad and Medad, it was to “prophesy,” to do those things that made for greater peace, greater justice, greater community. It was do to those things that broke down barriers between people, that protected the innocent and the vulnerable, to make sure the hungry were fed and the hurting helped. All of that is conveyed in that little word “prophesy.”

And likewise, that crowd at Jerusalem were also commissioned not just to feel the presence of God through the tongues of fire and the winds of the Spirit, they were not just to have some sort of warm and gooey godly glow, but they too were commissioned to **DO** something. At the very end of Peter’s sermon to them he tells the crowd that their task is to show and to tell Israel, to show and to tell the whole world, that Christ is indeed the representative of a God Who is love unconditional for each and all, Who expects justice for each and all. That’s the point of the naming of all those countries represented, for these newly Spirit-infused Christians were by to be by their the harbingers, the doers, of peace and justice that could begin to transcend the barriers that we put between us, that could show the world that love can be stronger than hate, and that what unites us as one people, on one planet, is far more urgent, far more important, than the things that divide us, that tempt us into our silos where we sling slogans, that whisper to us that those who are “different” are not to be trusted. Or, as Pastor James Howell says, the Spirit commissions us to be “God’s Spirit-empowered church, finding the language to speak to the people out there. No more church jargon and certainly no smug, judgmental declamations. How do we talk about the best news ever to people who hear nothing but awful news, people who are jaded and cynical?”¹

The Apostle James famously said in his letter that “Faith without works is dead,”

¹<http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/8212/weekly-preaching-pentecost>

and the story of the Spirit's coming on Mt. Sinai and in Jerusalem and in Colorado Springs is the story of a people who are to be fired up for doing those things that show the fruits of the Spirit, those fruits so eloquently described by Paul: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." A faith that does not move from feeling to fruits, that does not lead to seeking to enact those fruits is not a truly Spirit-driven faith.

Now, it's possible you may be thinking: I don't have any particular gifts that the Spirit has given to me. Well, I have to say, you're wrong. For the third thing we can learn from the story of Pentecost and the scriptures the worldwide Church chooses for this day comes from Paul where he oh-so-simply says "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." To each. To **each**. Your age, young or old, doesn't exempt you. Your gender, your race, your class, your orientation, the amount of money that is or isn't in your wallet don't exempt you. Whether you're new to the faith or in your 10th decade of following Christ you too have been gifted to in some way, in some fashion to proclaim and to show that it is indeed Jesus Who is Lord of life and not the "principalities and the powers" that so often claim to be in charge. Listen to how a minister by the name of Nancy Townley says that God gifts each one of us:

Somehow, sometime in the midst of our fear comes the realization that we possess the abilities to affect change for the better. We may not be able to stop wars, but we can change the attitudes and actions which demean people, right where we are.

I hope that you have begun nodding just a little bit, for she is right. And she then concludes by asking you and me the question of what we shall do with the gifts that the Spirit of God has given to us:

What will be your commitment today? Will you take one hour out of your busy week to help someone? Will you seek to support ministries of peace and

reconciliation. Will you feed the hungry, clothe those who are in need; visit the sick and those imprisoned; welcome the stranger ... **what will you do?** You might be sitting there saying "I can't do these things. I can't get around very well." You **can** help. Can you pray? Can you encourage others in these ministries of caring? Everyone here can do something.²

Everyone here can do something. For to each, *to each* – to you, and you, and you – is given the gifts of the Spirit to make this world a better place.

May it be so! Amen.

²<http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/8177/new-worship-connection-june-4-2017>
Emphases mine.