

Sermon - June 16, 2024
“Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Acts 18:24-28

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill our open hearts, and anoint the sharing of Jesus' words and bless your people through them. May the words of our Lord sustain our continuing transformation into Christ's image and lead us to fruitful labor as those sent into Jesus' mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you and binds us together in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning. Let me encourage us to remember our fathers and the love they have extended to us. Do we remember our theme verse for our journey through Acts? It is Acts 1:8: “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.”ⁱ

One of the struggles I have as I look at each chapter in Acts is there are a multitude of sermons in each chapter. There is so much to share and to learn and so much background that helps us engage God's word found in Acts. In light of all of the richness in these texts for those seeking to learn from the early church, I often find myself struggling to get to a single focus for a sermon. For those reading along in your Bibles, in Acts chapter 18 we have topics such as tentmakers, Holy Spirit working through a Roman proconsul to allow the Gospel to be preached

in Rome, communities that are open to the Gospel and those that are closed, the smallness of the Christian movement and the fear it causes in the culture, and visions given to Paul at key moments in his ministry. All of those and more are found in Chapter 18. But for this morning, I felt led to focus on Apollos and the idea of the Way of the Lord and the Way of God.

We don't know a great deal about Apollos other than he is a Jew from Alexandria. We are given a list of attributes about him by Luke, starting with he is an eloquent man. That means he effectively shares the word of God with people in a manner they can understand. He is well-versed in the scriptures. He is from Alexandria, the Greek city where the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek, a place of study and learning, and there he has come to know the scriptures well. Someone instructed him in the Way of the Lord, so he knows something about Jesus. On top of that, Luke tells us that he speaks with burning enthusiasm and teaches accurately the things concerning Jesus. These are excellent qualifications for a pastor. In fact, if a church were putting together a list of what they might want their pastor to be like, the attributes Luke lists for Apollos would be a good start. And to this list of impressive attributes, Luke adds that Apollos only knows the baptism of John. Luke also notes that when Priscilla and Aquila go and hear Apollos speak in the synagogue, they find that he is a bold speaker. So Apollos knows about Jesus and speaks boldly and teaches accurately the things concerning Jesus. Apollos knows the Hebrew scriptures, and on top of all of that, he is a great speaker. He sounds pretty good except for that little phrase Luke adds about his knowing only the baptism of John. So here is a great preacher for Jesus boldly speaking about Jesus, but there is a problem. He knows only the baptism of John and not the Way of God.

Let's see if we can make some sense out of what Luke is telling us here about the baptism of John and the Way of God. If we think about John, we will recall that John baptized with water those who had repentant hearts and were seeking to follow a voice crying out in the wilderness to make straight the pathways of God, to turn their hearts to God and live as God asked them to live. John called the people of Israel back to God. In the fullness of time in John's ministry, Jesus comes to John to be baptized. John objects, knowing that he needs Jesus to baptize him, but Jesus insists and John baptizes Jesus, and as Jesus comes up out of the waters of baptism, two notable things occur: the Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove and in Mark's Gospel, we hear God's voice speak the words "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."ⁱⁱ Before Jesus does any ministry, before the first sign is worked, before the first teaching is shared,

before the cross comes into view, God recognizes Jesus as His Son the Beloved; with whom he is well pleased. The Father expresses love for the Son not based on what Jesus has done in the past, is doing now, or will do in the future. The Father expresses love for the Son because that is the Father's nature. When we believe in Jesus, we are invited into this relationship of perfect love, but before that, while we are still sinners, we know that God loves us because while we were sinners Jesus died for us. God loves us right where we are. No matter how far from God we have moved, God loves us, God likes us, and God cares about us. We are God's beloved daughters and sons, and we are loved. We are not loved because of what we do, and we are not loved less when we don't live in a manner that honors God. God loves us with steadfast love. God doesn't stop loving us when we sin, God does not bring bad things into our lives when we fail to live as He wants us to live. God loves us enough to die on a cross for us so that we might be reconciled to Him for all eternity. We don't earn God's love by being good. There is no reward system for God's love based on our works. God loves us. If we don't hear anything else this morning, hear these words: You are loved by God!

Let me move back to the difference between the baptism of John and of Jesus. Jesus' baptism is in Spirit and truth. Jesus' baptism includes the gift of Holy Spirit. John points us to Jesus and helps us move towards God through repentance. Jesus reconciles us to the Father and enables us to live as Spirit-filled people. Remember our theme verse? 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."ⁱⁱⁱ In Jesus' baptism, we receive Holy Spirit. Now I think when we get to a discussion of Holy Spirit, many of us will run out of head and heart knowledge. We may find that we have a Holy Spirit deficit in our lives. Some of us may have sat in church for many years convinced that since we believe in Jesus, we are saved and have never really heard about or experienced Holy Spirit. We do confess each Sunday that we believe in Holy Spirit, but what do we know about Holy Spirit and what has been our experience with Holy Spirit? I think that the difference between the baptism of John and the Way of God is Holy Spirit. I think that Apollos knew about Jesus and could teach about him accurately, but what he was lacking was Holy Spirit. He was lacking the Way of God, a life empowered with Holy Spirit.

Here is a little spoiler alert from Chapter 19 that I think helps us see this point. When Paul continues his mission work and finds a few believers in Ephesus, the first question he asks

them is if they received Holy Spirit when they believed in Jesus. They reply that they did not know there was a Holy Spirit. They are trying to follow Jesus, but they do not know the Way of God. And I think for former United Methodists, not knowing about Holy Spirit is a common theme. Holy Spirit was not emphasized by United Methodist pastors. Some did, but many did not. And I hope that for some of us this morning, we are sitting in the pews asking ourselves if we know in both our heads and our hearts Holy Spirit, if we have received power when Holy Spirit came on us. I can relate to Apollos as I see his story and mine in a similar light. Let me spend a few minutes this morning and share with you some of my story, some of my journey as I move into head and heart knowledge of Holy Spirit. My hope is that as I share my experiences you too will begin to find your own experiences with Holy Spirit and you will begin to share them with each other to build up the body of Christ.

I, like many of you, was baptized as an infant. I do not remember that day, the water, or any of that experience. I do have a faded photo taken that day of me in a white gown and I have a certificate of baptism that documents that on June 20th in the year of the Lord 1958, I was baptized. As Methodists we believe that when we are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we receive Holy Spirit. I cannot share with you any memory from that moment that confirms I received Holy Spirit. I grew up in the church. My dad was a choir director for the First Church of God in Bluefield, West Virginia. That means every Sunday we were in church. Dad started that job the year I was born and retired not long after I graduated from college. I was in church but I cannot share with you a single story from my growing up in the church when I recall teaching about Holy Spirit. That does not mean that some pastors did not teach about Holy Spirit. I just don't recall hearing that topic taught in Sunday School or preached from the pulpit. I can't share with you a point in my life journey when I became aware of Holy Spirit. We did say the Apostles' Creed and we talked about the Trinity, but I don't recall learning about Holy Spirit. Looking back on those years, the first place I see Holy Spirit action in my life was when as a young teen. I was moving away from God and to the world, and my mother gave me a little paperback book titled *God Calling* and I actually read that little book. I was not aware of Holy Spirit in my life, but I did have a desire or a curiosity about God and I read that little book. Looking back, I see the desire on my heart that led me to read that book as Holy Spirit acting in me, giving me that desire. There was not a lot of discussion in my house about Holy Spirit. My dad's father was a United Methodist Church pastor, but even when we visited with my

grandparents, I don't recall a lot, if any, of discussion about Holy Spirit. I do recall some talk about the Pentecostals and how they were not stable or approved followers of Jesus, that whatever they did was not considered respectable Christianity. I should also point out that in that part of West Virginia, we had churches where they handled snakes and there was one close to my cousin's house. They were topics of a lot of discussions, but nothing related to Holy Spirit. In high school I started going to the First United Methodist Church of Princeton because a lot of my high school friends went there and the choir director at the high school was their director and she needed men's voices. I went through confirmation as a senior in high school and see that time of standing before a congregation and confessing Jesus as my Lord and Savior as another time when Holy Spirit was active in my life giving me a desire for God, but there was no teaching or prayer to receive Holy Spirit as part of that confirmation that I recall. My first year of college was at a little Baptist college in Virginia, not too far from our home, that required attendance at chapel services every week. I can't say that I learned anything about Holy Spirit while there but I was in the engineering department. How I got there is a story for another day. From there, I moved to Virginia Tech and was pretty focused on trying to catch up and survive the engineering curriculum. During those years, I do recall a time when I had what I think was a Holy Spirit experience. I was struggling with school, life was difficult, there was lots of stress, and I was going home to help on the farm one Friday evening, and as I came over the hill where you could see into the town of Princeton, I was filled with peace. Something outside touched my stress and I experienced peace as I looked upon that little town from a place where I had looked out on the town many times before. Looking back, I see that moment as an experience with Holy Spirit. I did not know who he was, but I received a gift of peace that removed the stress I was carrying. I was not praying and was not crying out to Jesus, but I was touched with peace.

I will also mention that I met Kay at Virginia Tech and I see that as a Holy Spirit moment, a moment when Holy Spirit gave me a nudge, push, desire, or awareness that I needed to pay attention to her. Sometimes, looking back on my life, I can see Holy Spirit working in spite of my ignorance. I did graduate from Virginia Tech and yes, they were glad to see me leave. I was not a star student but I survived.

The next time I recall Holy Spirit acting in my life was on an Easter morning at church. As I sat in the choir loft at one point in the service, everything about that church, the people, the candles, the decorations, the music, suddenly changed, and all in the room became what I would

describe as beautiful. Holy Spirit moved in me, letting me catch a glimpse of the love of Christ. I also developed a desire to read the Bible and after two years got it read. Holy Spirit awoke a desire in me for the things of God, to learn about Jesus. Not long after my Easter experience, I was sitting in a fourth grade Sunday school class helping the teacher and he presented the Gospel to the kids, and I can say for the first time in my life the light came on and I began to understand what Jesus did for me on the cross, making a way for me to be reconciled to God. Not too many weeks after that I found myself sitting in RFK stadium on the top deck listening to Franklin Graham, and when he gave the invitation, I found a desire arise in me to get up and go forward, and I went out onto the field into the end zone and prayed with a young man to receive Jesus. Holy Spirit was still unknown to me, but he was at work guiding, leading, and using my desires to lead me to Jesus. That night I experienced forgiveness and understood my sins were washed away by Jesus' action on the cross, his blood availed for me.

Mission trips have been for me a time when I experience Holy Spirit. From the time I leave till the time I get back, I experience Holy Spirit in those trips in ways I don't experience him in day-to-day living.

I still didn't have a head and heart knowledge of Holy Spirit, but looking back, I see the guidance of Holy Spirit through many experiences. One of the key experiences was when I was called into ministry at Annual Conference in 2012. I have never before or since felt the call of God so powerfully as I did that night sitting in the bleachers at Annual Conference. Annual Conference is not a place I often experience Holy Spirit but when the call for those stirred to move into ministry came, my heart received a call from God, through Holy Spirit to come. Not an audible sound, but an inward call from someone external to me to come and respond to God's call. I had never been to an ordination service and only went because I was curious about what happened. Can we see Holy Spirit at work in my life stirring my desires, using my curiosity to lead me? That call led me to Asbury Seminary where I took every class I could on the topic of Holy Spirit. Most of those were taught by Dr. Steven Seamands who knew Holy Spirit and knew others who did as well. He opened the door to me for head knowledge and heart knowledge about Holy Spirit. He opened the door to rich teaching developed across the ages from other people who have sought and are seeking Holy Spirit. He helped connect me to new places where I could grow in my understanding of Holy Spirit. One of the things I learned is how I react to Holy Spirit moving in my heart; for me, tears come. For me, to sit in a seminary class took a lot

of tissues as I listened, learned, and let Holy Spirit work in me to transform me and guide me to a deeper walk with Christ. During one of those weeks at the Asbury Seminary site in Orlando, Florida at the end of a chapel service, an offer was made to pray for people to receive Holy Spirit. I got up and went forward to the kneeler, hands were laid on me, and a prayer was offered for me to receive Holy Spirit. There was no outward manifestation that I can point to, no tears, no new joy that I found. Did I receive Holy Spirit? All I can share is that to this day my desire to have more of Jesus continues to grow. Have there been other moments since then when I have experienced a touch of Holy Spirit in a new way doing a new work in me? Yes, some of those occurred at New Room, a place where people gather to meet with Jesus.

I will leave each of us to reflect on my summary of experiences where I see Holy Spirit at work in my life and let you decide if Holy Spirit is present. I hope that each of us will take time to allow Holy Spirit to bring to our minds times in our lives when Holy Spirit was and is leading, guiding, and calling us to a life with and in Jesus. I want to invite all who have a desire this morning to receive Holy Spirit, whose hearts are open to letting Holy Spirit move and work in them, to be prayed over to receive Holy Spirit. I want to invite those who are willing to step out into a new journey, to become open to Holy Spirit, to learn more about Holy Spirit, to become more sensitive to Holy Spirit's touch in our lives, to become open to the guidance of Holy Spirit, and to be open to the transforming power of Holy Spirit working in our hearts. I want to invite us into what Jesus received at his baptism when the Spirit descended on him. It is an invitation into a Spirit-filled life that is lived in mission with Jesus, doing what he did when he was on earth. It is not an invitation requiring any kind of outward manifestation but for a more complete surrender of ourselves to Jesus and inward transformation. It is an invitation for those who hunger for more of Jesus and desire to grow in knowledge about him in the power of Holy Spirit. Let me ask everyone to close their eyes for a moment. If you are interested in receiving Holy Spirit, if you have a hunger for Holy Spirit to work in your heart, if you have a desire for more of Jesus, if you are able, would you stand and extend your hands out in front and turn your palms upward. If you are not able to stand, then extend your arms where you are and turn your palms upward and listen. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Jesus, pour out Holy Spirit on us gathered here who desire to receive Holy Spirit, whose hearts are open, whose hearts desire more of you. Lord, we may not know what it means to receive Holy Spirit but we are willing to learn. Holy Spirit,

descend upon us, give us fresh wind and fresh fire. Come, Holy Spirit, and descend upon us.
Receive power from on high. Receive Holy Spirit. Amen.

Open your eyes, please stand as you are able and join in the singing of our closing hymn.

Pray with me. Jesus, you promised to send power upon your people. Jesus, here we are before you this morning desiring that power, desiring more of you. Jesus, pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here with open hearts. Come, Holy Spirit, come, Come, Holy Spirit, come and be poured out on us that we might be poured out in this place for you. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Linger before God in this place, wait for power from Jesus and then go out as one sent to walk the Long Road.

Go forth into Jesus' mission to all people. Amen

ⁱ Acts 1:8 Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (pp. 3256-3257). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Mark 1:10 – 11 Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 3043). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 1:8 Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (pp. 3256-3257). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.