



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

ALTERNATE ENERGY

Acts 2:1-21

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There is a lot of talk these days among scientists and ordinary folk, like you and me, about alternative sources of energy. Considering climate change, carbon emissions, and concern about the global environment, it is an important conversation to have. Using the wind, sun, and water to produce energy is a good thing. This morning I want to talk about another alternate form of energy – another power that is the greatest power of all – the power of the Spirit of God.

After the resurrection, when believers gathered in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, they discovered a new kind of energy. Following the instructions of Jesus, they gathered for prayer; they gathered in expectation. Suddenly, a sound like the rush of a mighty wind filled the room with the Spirit of God. Tongues of fire descended upon their heads and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. They began to preach the gospel in the languages of those gathered in Jerusalem from around the Mediterranean world. Each heard the gospel proclaimed in his or her own language. I do not know if it was a miracle of hearing or a miracle of speaking, but I know this: the church found a new source of power that day. The Holy Spirit has sustained and

empowered the church ever since.

Sometimes we get mixed up about what gives energy and life to the church. Too often the church has relied on the wrong kind of power. The church has built uneasy alliances with the state, thinking that we can use the coercive power of the government to accomplish our goals. Such thinking began with the Emperor Constantine and has continued in some churches to this day. Such thinking brought down the church in France, Russia, and Latin America. We are blessed that our national constitution provides for the free exercise of religion and prohibits the establishment of any one sect or religion. The authority of the church comes not from the state, but from God; our power comes not from coercion, but from the Spirit of God; our life comes not from laws, but from the gifts of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit gives life to the church. Sometimes we get confused and think it is all about the budget, the buildings, or the busyness of the church. At times, I hear people talking about the “best church” as if being church is a competitive event like a beauty pageant or a playoff game. I want to hear about a Spirit-filled

church. I want to see the fruit of the Spirit which Paul says are the intangibles: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22, 23). Paul often reminds the church, it is not about our strength, our wisdom, or our capabilities. It is about the Spirit of God working in and through us together. We need to measure everything we do by the fruit of the Spirit. If we do not see these gifts manifest in us, then we are operating out of some other power than the Holy Spirit. God has given us a beautiful source of alternate energy and we need to let it flow through us.

Some years ago, Dr. Lucy Rose, a professor of preaching at a Presbyterian Seminary, had a cancer that metastasized in her bones. She was weakening physically; her energy was low. She wrote to her friends:

As I learn to live not day to day, but hour to hour with the particular ups and downs of pain and weariness, I am growing more and more... grateful for such affirmations as ‘I believe in God...I believe in Jesus Christ... I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting’. I have

my whole life believed in the sovereign transcendence of God. Now I am experiencing the deep immanence of God within me, the incarnation in me of God's life so that in terms of that life it is no longer I who live but Christ within me... I am aware that this life within me that arises as the gift of the Holy Spirit is everlasting life and cannot be snuffed out. This life draws me deep into God's love and into the bonds that constitute our life together as the community of believers (from a personal letter of Dr. Lucy Rose).

She learned to live in the power of an alternate source of energy.

God has given us astonishing, spiritual gifts. We have gifts of healing, wisdom, discernment, administration, teaching, compassion, and vision. We do not all have the same gifts. In Corinthians, Paul reminds us that we are given these gifts not for our private benefit, but for the good of all. God gives us these gifts not to boast, but to use them for the common good of the church.

Sometimes we go off the rails. There are times in our lives, as followers of Jesus, when we get tired, worn out, focused on the wrong things, preoccupied with what other people are saying, distracted by concerns of this world, embittered by the wrongs we have endured, and envious of

others. We may even use our God-given gifts to serve our own gain.

On this Pentecost Sunday, we emerge from this pandemic and from our sheltering places. As we come together as the church, what kind of energy will empower our lives? This past week some staff members were talking about the experiences of people in our community during the past year. They shared how some of us have been in pain and grief facing hard challenges, some of us are worn out and exhausted trying to juggle a thousand things, and how still others are feeling isolated and disconnected from one another and from the church.

One person said, "I feel as if we have been languishing." Now, there's a word! To languish is to lose energy, grow weak, or fail to thrive. In this pandemic, we can become like people drifting and discouraged without purpose or interests.

When these things happen, we come to this Pentecost moment when the Spirit rushes in like a powerful wind, cleans out our dusty lives, and gives us new energy. It comes in hearing jazz music, in confessing our sins, in baptizing children, in feeding the hungry, in pounding a Habitat hammer, in visiting a neighbor, in helping a colleague, in reading Scripture, in offering a prayer, and in tilling the soil. In these moments, we take our rest; we are cleansed; we are renewed; we are sustained; we are filled with a

power beyond anything we imagined; and we are sent out to tell the story of Jesus.

When the church lives in the power of the Spirit, it is something beautiful to behold. Leonardo Boff, the Latin American theologian, puts it this way: "The church is the [very] sacrament of the Holy Spirit... the risen Christ himself active in the world." Pentecost pulls no punches. No longer can the Spirit be contained in the chancel, or at the Lord's Table, or in the congregation. Instead, the Spirit rests on everyone who calls on the name of the Lord. Young people shall see visions and old people shall dream dreams. Through blood and fire and smoky mist, through wonders and signs and surprises of every kind, the Spirit of God will empower the church and transform the world.

One of the pastors at my former congregation told me about a young man who came to faith in Jesus Christ through the outreach of the church. He wanted to be baptized and become Christ's disciple. He was to be baptized at a casual service like our MorningSong. When the day of his baptism arrived, he came to church wearing a suit he had purchased just for that occasion. When the pastor asked this young man, who normally sported t-shirts and blue jeans, why he was wearing a suit, he said, "Are you kidding? This is the greatest day of my life. I want to be all dressed up

so I can remember it forever.” His baptism marked the day the Spirit of God turned his life around. I think that if we had baptized him in the river, he would have jumped in – new suit, tie, shoes, and all.

Without the Spirit’s power we cannot envision a new life or build a faithful church. Without the Spirit’s power, we cannot go into our community to overcome hatred with love or reconcile differences. Without the Spirit’s power, we cannot heal families that are troubled, offer hope to the hopeless, or lead others to faith. We are here because we refuse to give in or give up. We are here as the body of Christ because we long for the Spirit’s power. In the Spirit’s power, we can rebuild our community, lift our feeble spirits, reengage with one another, and come together in faith, hope, and love. In the Spirit’s power, we can welcome the stranger, visit the prisoner, heal the sick, and feed the hungry. In the Spirit’s power, we can worship God, love our neighbor, and teach our children.

Come, Holy Spirit, and set our hearts on fire.

Come, Holy Spirit, and fill us with your power.

Come, Holy Spirit, and send us out to be Christ’s body in and for the world.