

Truly Immanuel

Acts 2:1-13

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ May 15, 2016 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

¹When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." (Acts 2:1-13, NRSV)

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

Here's a question I'm sure you've been asked before. If you could have dinner with any historical figure from the past, who would you choose?

This week I did a little research on the internet to learn how others answered this question and I was surprised by many of the answers. Lots of people chose Albert Einstein. I'm not sure he'd be my choice. Do I really want to try to make dinner conversation with perhaps the smartest person who ever lived? Sigmund Freud was another popular choice. Really? I'd be too afraid that this is exactly how he'd be looking at me across the table, psychoanalyzing me for way I ate my spaghetti. Astonishingly, more than a few people actually chose Adolf Hitler as their favored dinner guest. Who in the world wants to have dinner with Hitler! A couple of people, likely thinking more practically, mentioned Julia Child as their first choice. At first I that seemed like an odd selection but more I thought about it I realized what a brilliant choice this is. It's an invitation to dinner, after all, and if she's cooking the meal I'm tempted to make her my choice as well.

One of the problems with this question is that we are only asked to consider who we would like to share dinner with and we forget to consider whether or not that person would want to have dinner with us? Sure, it would interesting to have Elvis Presley come over for a BBQ one night but would the King really want to sit on my back deck with me eating tri-tip? Somehow I doubt it.

Of course, in a church crowd like this many people name Jesus as the person they'd like to invite. In 2013 Time Magazine published their ranking of the top 100 most influential people of all time.¹ Jesus was number one, just ahead of Napoleon and Mohammed. Even people who aren't Christians recognize that sharing a meal with Jesus would be a phenomenal opportunity. The surprising difference with Jesus, of course, is that I believe he would be just as delighted to share a meal with you as you would be to share it with him. Can you imagine?

When I was younger I used to be very jealous of the disciples. I had disciple envy. Here were people who, like me, loved Jesus and were trying to follow Jesus but who, unlike me, actually got to *be with Jesus*. They stayed with him, took trips with him, listened to him teach from the front row, got to ask him direct questions, watched and even helped him perform miracles, and, yes, got to eat dinner with him many, many times. Since I knew that one of the names for Jesus in the Bible is Immanuel, which means, literally, "God with us,"² I felt a bit cheated that God wasn't quite as much with

¹ See list at <http://ideas.time.com/2013/12/10/whos-biggest-the-100-most-significant-figures-in-history/>

² See Matthew 1:23, for instance: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means "God with us")."

us today as he was back then. Maybe you've felt the same way, wishing that Christ would be as present with us today as he was with his first followers. Think of how things would be different today if Jesus were literally right here with us!

As you know, that luxury didn't last forever even for those first disciples. In fact, when we meet the disciples here in Acts 2 Jesus is gone. Ten days earlier the resurrected Christ ascended into heaven and left them behind. Before he left, however, he did promise them that his Father would send the Holy Spirit to be with them and guide them into their mission. They were told to wait in Jerusalem until that happened, which they had been doing now for ten days.

Jesus kept his promise. He always keeps his promise. On the day of Pentecost, when Jerusalem was full of pilgrims come to celebrate the grain harvest, the Holy Spirit showed up. With the power of a violent wind, and the purifying force of a raging fire, and the wonder of universal speech, God's Spirit was poured out on his people, his church. What you need to understand, however, is that this was not some impersonal power or energy filling the disciples. This was not a bunch of Jedi knights finding a connection to the Force. The Holy Spirit was God, is God, and will always be God. This, of course, is a mystery we will never understand; God is one God, but revealed to us in the persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.³ God exists in community, in family.

Even though we don't understand this fully, we do know that it means that at Pentecost the Spirit which comes is literally the Spirit of Christ. On that day, God come to be present with his people in a new and even more profound way than before. Remember, Jesus never told us he would show us the way, or give us the truth, or impart to us life. He said, "**I am the way. I am the truth. I am the way.**"⁴ Therefore, Jesus does not give us these things but gives us himself and then, having Christ, we have all we need. This is what is happening when the Spirit of Christ descends on his people.

By the way, this is what always happens whenever the community of Jesus' followers gathers in faith and unity. In those days Jesus' followers were together, not just physically but in spirit. Together they believed that Jesus was the Messiah. His crucifixion and resurrection had made this fact undeniable. Together they had then trusted him when he told them to wait in Jerusalem and pray until the Spirit came. As they gathered in faith and unity, the Spirit did come.

It is no different today. In our context, when we gather in unity, not just physically together as we are now, but in a unity of spirit and truth, sharing faith in Christ and sharing a desire to follow him wherever he leads, when we do that then the Spirit of Jesus will be poured out today in Sacramento just as powerfully as it was back then in Jerusalem. The signs may not be as visually spectacular as they were on that first Pentecost, but the results will be the same.

Just this past week I was gathered with a group of others from our church as people took turns telling stories of how Christ had been at work in their lives. It was a powerful experience for me and others there. Granted, no wind kicked up. I didn't see any flames atop any heads. Everybody spoke in English. Still, as we shared that time together and focused our hearts and praise on Christ the space we shared became sacred space and every one of us sensed the Spirit of Christ moving in that place among us.

You see, whenever we meet as a community in fellowship, or join in song and prayer as we worship, or gather around the Lord's Supper to be nourished, and when we do so in anticipation that God will come and meet us, then God, by the Spirit of Christ, will come. We cannot run ahead, of course. We must wait. As a theologian named John Stott once put it, "As a body without breath is a corpse, so the church without the Spirit is dead." We cannot run ahead, but when we wait for the Spirit to come, then the church is made alive, alive to become the body of Christ in this world carrying out the mission of Christ to the world.

All this leads me back to where we started. You see, we don't have to wonder what it would be like to have dinner with Jesus. We can. We do. If we truly are people who have come to place our faith in Christ and are willing to wait and follow him wherever he leads us, then in our gathering Christ, by the presence of his Spirit, has already come to live within and among us. In fact, I would say to you that we have no reason to envy the disciples back then because Christ is actually more profoundly present with us by his Spirit now than he was before Pentecost when he was present in the flesh and the Spirit had not yet come. Because remember, in those days there were many times when the disciples

³ Shirley Guthrie says, "The Trinity is not a mathematical formula to be understood but a theological reality to be confessed." We don't understand this three-in-one nature of God but we, nonetheless, confess it to be true.

⁴ John 14:6

couldn't even find Jesus. He'd be off early one morning praying on some hillside and they'd run around frantically searching for him. They'd be alone on the lake in the middle of the storm afraid that they were going to drown because they didn't have Jesus with them in the boat.

That never happens to us. Do you realize this? By the Spirit, Christ is *always* present with us, not just the power of Jesus, or the benefits of Jesus, or the teachings of Jesus, but Jesus himself. It's what he meant by his last words on earth when he told his disciples, **"Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."**⁵

Think about it, whenever we pray, whether crying out in times of desperation or singing celebration in times of joy, Christ, by the Spirit, is there with us ushering our prayers to the very throne of God.⁶ Whenever we seek God's will, Christ is within us and among us ready to guide and direct our steps, and is constantly doing so in ways that we may not recognize until we look back years later.⁷ Whenever we try to change to become more like the people we know God wants us to become, Christ is there in the yoke with us pulling a load that is far too heavy for us to pull alone.⁸ Whenever we have opportunities to tell other people about what Christ has done for them, it is Christ within us who gives us the words to speak when we feel completely ill-equipped for evangelism. Whenever we pray for healing in the lives of others and we actually see healing occur, who do you think it is that is within us at work?⁹ And the unity that we experience in the church with one another, unity across racial, economic, political, and personal differences that otherwise would divide us, that unity exists because it is none other than Christ in me which is connected to Christ in you.¹⁰

These last seven weeks as we have been celebrating Easter we have been reminded that not only did Jesus rise from the dead but that he is still risen from the dead. Resurrection isn't a one-time event but the new reality of God's Kingdom. And Pentecost follows Easter not just by coincidence, but because it is the fulfillment of Easter. The opening prayer for the Roman Catholic Mass on this day of Pentecost is, "Almighty and ever-living God, you fulfilled the Easter promise by sending us your Holy Spirit." Easter and Pentecost are profoundly connected. The body of Jesus broke out of the grave at Easter which led to the Spirit of Jesus exploding out into the world at Pentecost. And when that happened, the same resurrection power that raised Jesus from the dead came to live in and among his people, the church, by the Holy Spirit. Christ is not just risen, but risen and alive and at work in our midst.

This all is as true here at Faith as it is in any other context. The Spirit of Christ is in our midst. We may not see all the pyrotechnics of that first Pentecost, but the same power is here this Pentecost. And just as it was back then, the Spirit's presence does not only bring personal significance but public impact. Christ's Spirit fills us not only to save us but to send us, not only to bless us but to make us a blessing, not only to be transformed ourselves but to be made transforming agents as we go out into the broken world around us.

The Kingdom of God is among us because the King, by his Spirit, is among us. In a very few moments, in fact, we will share a table with Him, a meal at which he will be our host. He will meet us here and then go with us where we go, ahead of us, behind us, within us, between us, above and below us.

Frank Laubach was a missionary who served in in the Philippines in the early part of the 20th century. At one point he looked back during a very difficult time and wondered if any of his efforts had amounted to anything. He and his wife had lost three children to malaria. Because of health reasons, he was now separated from his wife and his one remaining child. He was an isolated and broken man. In the midst of all this, however, the Spirit of Christ came to him and met him again in an undeniable way.

⁵ Matthew 28:20

⁶ Romans 8:34 proclaims, **"Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died--more than that, who was raised to life - is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us."**

⁷ Romans 8:28 proclaims, **"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."**

⁸ As Jesus reminds us in Matthew 11:28-30, **"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."**

⁹ See I Corinthians 12:9

¹⁰ I Corinthians 12:27 says, "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."

I'll close with words he wrote during that season of failure and pain. May his witness be an encouragement to you today, that even in the most difficult seasons of life, God can accomplish in and through us, by the power which is present and at work within us, abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.¹¹

The most wonderful discovery that has ever come to me is that I do not have to wait until some future time until the glorious hour. I do not need to...wait for any grave. This hour can be heaven. Any hour for anybody can be as rich as God. For do you not see that God is trying experiments with human lives. That's why there are so many of them. He has, at this moment, [millions and billions] of experiments going on around the world.

And His question is, "How far will this man and that woman allow me to carry this hour?" This Sunday afternoon at three o'clock He was asking it of us all. I do not know what the rest of you said, but as for me, I asked God, "How wonderful do you wish this hour alone with me to be?" And God answered convincingly, "It can be as wonderful as any hour that any human being has ever lived. For I who pushed life up through the protozoa and the tiny grass and the fish and the bird and the dog and the gorilla and the human being and who am reaching out toward eternity, I have not become satisfied yet. I am not only willing to make this hour marvelous, I am in travail to set you akindle with the Christ-thing that has no name. How fully can you surrender and not be afraid?"

And I answered, "Fill my mind with your mind to the last crevice. Catch me up in your arms, God, and make this hour as terribly glorious as any human being ever lived, if you will. I scarce see how one could live if his heart held more than mine has held from Thee these past few hours."

Clearly my job here is not to go to the town plaza and convince people to change their religious beliefs or to win a theological debate. My job is to live wrapped in God, trembling to His thoughts, burning with His passion. And my loved ones, that is the best gift you can give to the place where you live... You and I shall soon blow away from our bodies. Money, praise, poverty, opposition, these make no difference, for they will all alike be forgotten in a thousand years. But this Spirit, which comes to a mind set upon continuous surrender – this Spirit is timeless life.¹²

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. So what about you? Besides Jesus, what historical figure from the past would you like to have dinner with today? Why?
2. Read Acts 2:1-13. What do you notice here?
3. The Holy Spirit came upon the church with mighty wind, burning fire and mysterious speech. Why? What do these signs teach us about the Spirit? Are these things still true today?
4. Is it right to speak about the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ? Are these different ways of saying the same thing?
5. Do you believe that Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is as present with you (or even more so!) than he was with the disciples when he walked around Galilee with them? If so, what are the implications of this reality?
6. Can we have dinner with Jesus today? Do you live with a constant sense of Jesus' presence with you?

¹¹ See Ephesians 3:20

¹² Cited by John Ortberg, *New Community Series: Build Community* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 15-16.

7. Do you believe that the Spirit of Christ can work just as powerfully in the church today as it did in Acts? How have you seen this to be true?
8. Re-read the testimony by Frank Laubach which Jeff used at the close of the sermon. Which part of his testimony stands out to you?



Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Because the Holy Spirit is with us does that mean that Jesus is also with us?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Do you think it was fair that Jesus asked this man to give up everything?