

Spirit-Filled

John 16:4b-15, Acts 2:1-21

One of the most common questions we ask to find out someone's outlook on life is, "What do you think of when you see a glass that's only partly full?" Is the glass half empty or half full? The optimist, of course, will say that it's half full. The pessimist will say that it's half empty. The engineer will say the glass is too big. The scientist will say that it's all full – you just need to define what it's full of. The cynic wonders who drank the other half. The waitress comes over and fills it up. And the true optimist wonders whose paying for the next round.

What about you? How do you see the glass? Or, more importantly, how do you see your life? Is your life half full, or half empty? Or is it more than that? Are you totally filled, or totally empty? Maybe the spring weather has filled you up with joy, the summer has filled you with new possibilities, a new relationship fills you with joy, and you're blessed to overflowing. Or maybe you're empty. Maybe you've got too much month at the end of your money. Maybe you feel like you're running on empty as the school year continues on. Maybe you're drained from watching the news, of more school shootings, of more violence in Israel, of more politicians passing the blame for all of the problems. Or maybe it's just the everyday drain of busyness?

As our readings today bounce us around chronologically about the lives of the disciples, we can see both sides. The disciples had been emptied by all they'd been through. Their hopes had been dashed when Jesus was arrested, tried, and crucified. They'd been emptied by all they had gone through. Once they'd been filled with hope after Jesus' resurrection, they were emptied again after Jesus ascended and left them behind.

And yet, less than two months after Jesus' death, they were out speaking to the crowds. There may have been some of the same people in that crowd. No wonder people thought they must have had some liquid courage! The disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit, but the crowd thinks they're filled with spirits.

When we talk about the Pentecost story, we often think the greatest miracle is that the disciples were able to speak in the languages of all of the pilgrims who had

come to Jerusalem. That long list of names and nationalities draws us in, points us to looking there. Or we look to how the room they were in was filled with noise and wind and tongues of fire above everyone's heads. But instead, the greatest miracle is that the disciples are encouraged and empowered enough to go out and preach to the crowds.

It had happened before. John the Baptist is described as being filled with the Holy Spirit when the angel tells his father about his son yet to be born. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit when Mary, with Jesus still in her womb, comes to see her. Simeon is said to be full of the spirit as he tells Mary about what Jesus will do. They're filled with the Holy Spirit, and His message overflows out to those who need to hear it.

The disciples wouldn't stop with just one sermon on Pentecost. The Holy Spirit would fill them with confidence as they went out into the world, meeting people who might seem strange to them. As they traveled the world, they found those who had been emptied by the troubles of the world and filled them with hope and love and joy. The Holy Spirit overflowed and brought them to faith.

That miracle continues. The Holy Spirit continues to work through Word and Sacrament, to work through us, to create faith. The Holy Spirit gives us the words to say when we share our faith. The Holy Spirit gives us the boldness to share our faith with those around us.

Or at least, the Holy Spirit should. Earlier this week, the Barna Group released the results of a survey they'd done in cooperation with Lutheran Hour Ministries, titled "Spiritual Conversations in the Digital Age." A similar study had been done twenty five years ago, so they were able to see how attitudes had changed. And some of the results were striking. The most dramatic divergence over time is on the statement, "Every Christian has a responsibility to share their faith." In 1993, nine out of 10 Christians who had shared their faith agreed (89%). Today, just two-thirds say so (64%)—a 25-point drop.

Christians today, more than 25 years ago, perceive social barriers to sharing their faith. They are more likely to agree that faith-sharing is only effective when

they already have a relationship with the other person (47% vs. 37% in 1993) and to admit they would avoid a spiritual conversation if they knew their non-Christian friend would reject them (44% vs. 33%).

Why the change? Roxanne Stone, editor in chief at Barna Group, said “the truth is, most Christians are busy with other things: the day-to-day of normal life—jobs, kids, budgets, sports, weather and what’s premiering on Netflix this week. None of this is bad, but the unfortunate reality is that most adults don’t seem to connect their everyday experiences with their faith. Or, at least, they aren’t talking about it if they do.”

We have lives that are full, but full of stuff. Our calendars are full, but leave us feeling drained. Our minds are full, but only of trivial matters. We can look at that with a glass half empty view, seeing only the problems. But God isn’t content to leave us half-empty. Jesus said he came to give us life to the fullest. And that gives us something to share.

Roxanne Stone, editor in chief at Barna Group, continued: “Followers of Christ have something essential and meaningful to share with their families, neighbors, friends and those they come into contact with. As pastors and leaders, we must invest the resources of our churches toward coming alongside fellow believers and empowering them with confidence to talk about their faith despite the obvious barriers. We ought to help Christians begin to make the connections between their everyday, ordinary life—their sleeping, eating, going-to-work and walking-around life—and the faith that sustains them.”

Greg Finke, a pastor from Texas writes “While the Holy Spirit uses words to create faith, we forget that He also uses two other ingredients: the way we live and friendship.” The Holy Spirit sends us out and uses us as witnesses, but not all of us are sent to the ends of the earth. Instead, many of us are sent to our families and friends, our workplaces, our neighborhoods, schools and soccer fields and shopping malls and wherever else we go. The Holy Spirit doesn’t just fill us when we’re in the church building. The Holy Spirit fills us as we carry our faith out into the world. And the Holy Spirit is already out and active in the world before we get brought into the fold.

After all, didn’t the Holy Spirit help someone else tell you about Jesus? For many of you, the Holy Spirit brought you to faith through parents and sponsors and families bringing you to the life giving waters of Baptism. But for others, it was a different path. Maybe the Holy Spirit came alongside you through a friend who shared with you the Good News that Jesus died on the cross for your sins and rose again to give you new life. Or maybe the Holy Spirit came alongside you through a Sunday school teacher or VBS volunteer who shared with you the story of God’s love for you. Where would you and I be if the Holy Spirit had not spoken to us through somebody else? The Holy Spirit came alongside and worked through all of these people to give us faith in Jesus Christ, so we could believe and be saved.

Jesus gives his Word and Spirit so that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21). And He sends the Holy Spirit to fill us, comfort us, counsel us, console us, and help us. The Holy Spirit fills us with courage to let God work through us to share his Word and his love. There’s nothing more miraculous than that.

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