

June 5, Pentecost C (John 14:8-17, 25-27)

## **The Spirit-driven tendency to undermine barriers goes all the way back to Peter and Paul.**

by [Greg Carey](#) in the [May 18, 2022](#) issue

Pentecostalism brings many gifts to the global church. For one thing, it is Christianity's fastest-growing expression. And because so much of that growth is happening outside Europe and North America, Pentecostalism is a primary driver of global diversity in the church.

Because Pentecostal Christianity emphasizes the direct activity of the Holy Spirit, it has a way of undermining rigid doctrinal and social barriers. Folks who experience the pull of the Spirit need no supplementary source of authority. Not even conventional understandings of scripture will hinder the Spirit's work.

This was the case even before the emergence of modern Pentecostalism in preachers like Jarena Lee. While hearing a sermon, she felt an acute awareness of her malice toward someone who had hurt her. On the spot she voiced to God her desire to forgive everyone. Immediately she felt carried away by God's glory, and she stood up to extol the wonders of God and God's salvation right in the middle of the sermon. Unauthorized, she preached.

Converted in Richard Allen's Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Lee quickly began to seek complete sanctification. But after a divine voice told her to "go preach the gospel," Allen informed her that the church did not authorize women to preach. After years of restraining herself, Jarena Lee felt moved by the Spirit to interrupt a faltering sermon by another preacher and inaugurate her preaching career.

Although many Christians point to the Pauline epistles to justify women's exclusion from the preaching ministry, New Testament scholar Lisa M. Bowens shows that Lee continually cited Paul in telling her own story and in acknowledging the Spirit's work in her life. This Spirit-driven tendency to undermine the barriers that divide us goes

back to Peter's encounter with the centurion Cornelius and to Paul's challenge to the Galatians: in justifying the inclusion of gentiles apart from conversion to Judaism, both Peter and Paul appeal to the manifest working of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:47; Gal. 3:2).

The egalitarian impulse also broke out at modern Pentecostalism's emergence in the Azusa Street Revival. William Joseph Seymour, son of formerly enslaved parents, founded the Azusa Street Mission in 1906. Seymour developed a remarkable interracial and intercultural ministry and insisted that the gospel requires love without discrimination. Prior to his move to Los Angeles, Seymour himself first experienced the gift of speaking in tongues under the ministry of a Black woman pastor named Lucy Farrow. (See Estrela Alexander's recent book *The Women of Azusa Street*.)

I do not identify as a Pentecostal or charismatic Christian. I have never experienced the gift of tongues, often taken as definitive evidence of having been filled with the Spirit. I am aware that Pentecostalism sometimes veers into authoritarianism, as preachers who claim the power of the Spirit twist it to their own personal gain and political agendas.

Yet Pentecostalism's great gift to the church involves its testimony that God resides in power among believers. Many people denigrate Pentecostals and charismatics as "holy rollers" precisely because their powerful experience makes some of us uncomfortable.

Jesus' farewell discourse in John's Gospel extends from chapter 14 to 17, a massive block of red letters. Here Jesus prepares his disciples for his "departure," the period after his crucifixion and resurrection when they will no longer enjoy his bodily presence among them. The disciples are distressed. Thomas wants guidance to follow Jesus to his ultimate destination. Philip will settle for a full revelation of God. But Jesus has big news for them, news that still comes as a surprise: his departure is actually good for the disciples because of the gift of the Spirit. Hard as it is to imagine, the disciples' ministry will equal, and exceed, that of Jesus once he departs.

Each Gospel has a way of communicating this basic truth. Mark concludes not with appearances of the risen Jesus but with an empty tomb and a promise: Jesus will meet the disciples in Galilee (16:7). After the resurrection, Matthew's Jesus reminds the disciples that he will always be present among them, empowering them as they

conduct their mission (28:18–20). Luke previews and then writes Acts, where the disciples receive the Spirit and perform the same deeds Jesus does. They bless centurions, restore the dead to life, heal people who cannot walk, and endure trials before magistrates. In John, the disciples will amplify Jesus' ministry because the Holy Spirit lives with and among them. As Jesus tells them, they have no need for fear.

American Protestants often interpret Jesus' words here as addressed to us as individuals. That is a mistake. Much of the language in the farewell discourse is addressed in the second person plural. *You* is *y'all*. When Jesus tells the disciples they will know the Spirit because the Spirit abides with them and lives in them, he is speaking to them collectively. The Spirit constitutes and empowers us not alone but in community.

I disagree with William Joseph Seymour on some important theological issues. Yet the Azusa Street awakening shows us how the power of the Spirit can enliven individuals, enliven communities, and break the walls we maintain to protect us from one another. We need those gifts.