

**The Reverend Marjo Anderson**

**C: Day of Pentecost**

**Acts 2:1-21, Genesis 11:1-9, John 14:8-17, 25-27**

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**Salem, Bridgeport**

**“The Holy Spirit and My Van”**

Those of you who notice cars, will recall my white van.

I bought it new in 2005, so I've had it for 17 years and driven it nearly a quarter of a million miles.

It lasted far longer than any vehicle I've ever owned

and so there have been numerous times in the past when my personal mechanic, son Hans, would suggest that maybe I'd like to exchange it for something newer.

But my answer was always no, I didn't want a new van. I loved MY van.

And so Hans has taken care of it and helped it to last these many years and these many miles.

Sadly, however, the engine is on its last legs.

Of course I wanted to buy a new engine and put that in my van,

but that's when Hans drew the line, saying it just wasn't worth it.

And so for the last month Hans has been going online morning, noon, and night to try to find us a suitable replacement.

This past week he found one –

it's a Chrysler Town & Country instead of a Dodge Grand Caravan but it's the same vehicle. and instead of 240,000 miles it only has 140,000.

and instead of rust all over the van except on the back door, it has rust only on the back door.

And instead of being the midline version of the model,

this is the Limited Edition or top-of-the-line version.

Hans put in ALOT of time finding the vehicle,

he and Conner drove to the Bronx on Saturday with a trailer to pick it up,

Hans negotiated the price down,

and they brought it back and were so excited to show it to me.

This “new” van doesn't have the power doors that my old van has,

but that's the only thing it's missing.

And it has all kinds of other things my old van didn't have –

like a sunroof, a better stereo system, and a DVD player for the backseat,

plus it can memorize two different seat positions - one for Mark and one for me –

and for people with short legs like me,

I don't have to be on top of the steering wheel to reach the pedals

because the pedals move closer!

The kids were so excited to show me the wonders of his new van

and I knew I should be excited like they were, but I wasn't.

And while I am grateful for the time and energy they put into this,

I'm having a hard time being grateful for this new van because I love my old one.

It's been a wonderful vehicle.

It has served me so well and has met all my needs and I have so many fond memories attached to it.

It's familiar & comfortable & makes me feel good, & it just fits my needs like a glove. I love that van.

But as much as I love it, it doesn't work anymore.

Now I could spend a lot of money to put in a new engine,

but then something else would probably break, and it needs body work,

and it would end up consuming so many resources people would think I was nuts.

So I have a van that doesn't work anymore that I love

and a van that potentially will work far better and longer and I have no desire to drive it.

Such is the unreasonable nature of human emotion!

As I was thinking about the readings for this Sunday  
and the story of Pentecost and the sending of the Spirit,

I was struck by the similarity between my experience of the Spirit & my experience of my vans.  
Let me explain....

So what does it mean to have the Spirit?

Well, according to the Bible, it is when God breathes into the human form “ruach”,  
the breath of life, God’s own Spirit, that the form becomes a living soul.

To me, that’s when our life as a human being created in the image of God begins –  
when God breathes into us and we take our first breath.

In that sense every human being created in God’s image  
with God’s breath of life breathed into them, has God’s Spirit within them.

So if we receive the Spirit when we are born, then what happens when we are baptized?

Well when we are baptized we are adopted into the Christian family  
and that family is charged with the responsibility  
of helping us to come to know God through a Christian lens.

But it doesn’t end there.

According to our reading from John today,  
the disciples received the Spirit when Jesus appeared to them  
the evening of the very day he was raised from the dead.

Jesus gave them the Spirit right then and there  
to provide them with exactly what they needed at that moment.

There they were,  
filled with shame over their recent past actions of betrayal and denial and abandonment,  
confusion over what Jesus’ death meant for them in the present,  
and fear over what might happen to them in the future.

To respond to all those varied feelings, Jesus breathes his Spirit into them;  
Jesus breathes peace into their troubled spirits.

That gave them back their feelings of safety & familiarity & comfort, but that was all it did at that time.  
It was what they needed in that moment but it would not serve them long term,  
it wouldn’t provide them with fuel or power to move them,  
and it certainly wouldn’t take them to where God wanted them to go.

In that sense, the gift of the Spirit that they received on Easter  
and the gift of the Spirit we receive at baptism is kind of like my old van.

It serves extremely well for a while, but it’s not meant to serve forever.

While it provides a sense of security & safety, of familiarity & fondness, of comfort & companionship,  
it hasn’t the capacity to move anyone forward.

And moving forward is what the Spirit is all about.

The Spirit is wind and breath. And wind and breath by definition involve movement.

If nothing is moving then the Spirit is not at work!

So while that initial gift of the Spirit gave them peace, it wasn’t enough to move them forward.

In order for the disciples to carry out Jesus’ Great Commission,  
they needed a new outpouring of the Spirit which came 50 days later at Pentecost.

For the first 40 days they had Jesus teaching them  
and all they had to do was to listen and absorb what he was saying.

Right before he ascended he told them to do one thing:

Wait. Wait in the city. Wait to see what God will do for you and in you and through you.

So they had the Great Commission:

to go into all the world & continue to tell people about the God Jesus had come to tell about.

Now I want you to note that Jesus' Great Commission

was not to worship and it was not to learn and it was not to serve;

it was to do one thing – to teach, to communicate, to share – with WORDS –

who God is and invite people into a deeper relationship with that God.

That means that unless we are willing to witness – with our words – to who God is,  
we are not carrying out Jesus' command.

Now I know you don't want to hear that; I never wanted to hear it either.

Telling people about Jesus was not something I was taught to do.

It's not part of our tradition. It's not part of our Germanic Scandinavian culture.

We have a million and one excuses not to do it.

We can rationalize and justify not doing it from now until doomsday. But the fact remains:

Jesus' Great Commission to the disciples then and to us now is to tell the world about Jesus.

So as I was thinking about this story,

I realized that Lutherans telling people about Jesus is like me getting into that new van.

I would so much rather get into the old one, even though it's not going to take me anywhere. And yet,  
if I want to move forward, I need to at least get into that van, turn the key, and put it into gear.

It's only that initial action that is the stumbling block,

because driving that new van is really not that big of a deal. It's just a car.

And it drives like any car. And other people drive it and enjoy it just fine.

And the more I drive it, the more familiar I will get with it,

and the more I will learn how to use all of its features.

The stumbling block is simply getting into it in the first place.

Our old model of being CHURCH doesn't work anymore.

We can continue to sit in that van

and remember all of the good times and feel all of the comfort and familiarity and love,

but it's not going to take us anywhere.

To go somewhere we need to get into a different model. But here's the thing. It's not that difficult.

We don't have to come up with a mission or a purpose because Jesus has already given us that.

And we don't have to figure out how to carry out Jesus's plan for us.

Because if you note, the disciples weren't having a discussion about mission or purpose,

they weren't bringing in a consultant and working on a strategic plan,

they weren't figuring out what they were supposed to do and how they might go about doing it.

Peter wasn't sitting there thinking,

"I've never preached before but I'm supposed to be a preacher, so let's see....

I'll go to seminary, or take a preaching course, or read a book on preaching,

or maybe write some sermons or try them out on my friends here and get their feedback."

The disciples weren't sitting there thinking,

"Hmmm.... If we are supposed to take this message to the world,

we're going to have to learn other languages. I wonder how we go about that?"

No! The disciples weren't planning. They weren't supposed to plan.

The Church was not to be something that they planned and designed and built on their own.

It was supposed to be something that God planned and designed and built through them! That's the whole point of the reading from Genesis today.

The people in Babel wanted to do everything on their own for their own glory,

instead of doing what God wanted for God's glory – and we know how that turned out!

No, the disciples weren't having a committee meeting to plan how to carry out the great commission;

they were praying and reading scripture and waiting for God to work through them,

That's the new model.

And it's that new model that we resent and resist and refuse to try.

But... it's the only model that will work. And it's not nearly so difficult as we might think.

Because in the end,

all the disciples had to do was to open their bodies and minds and hearts and spirits

to that new thing that God wanted to give them, and God did all the rest.

No preaching classes for Peter, no language lessons for the apostles,

no committee meetings to figure out a strategic plan.

Instead the Spirit came as a mighty wind and blew them out of the room and into the world! And then the fire of the Spirit descended upon them

and touched their minds and moved down into their hearts and set their spirits ablaze

and they couldn't help but share God's Word.

They didn't decide to preach or witness; they just found themselves doing those things.

And when they did, amazing miracles happened – and... they were filled with joy!

God has created each of you for a purpose. God has called each of you here for a purpose.

Jesus has left us with the great commission.

It's like the new van sitting in my driveway.

We can refuse to get on board

and we will never accomplish our purpose as individuals or as a congregation.

Or we can get over our resistance, open the door to a new experience, and climb aboard.

We don't have to figure out our mission or come up with a strategic plan for growth.

If we spend our time and energy doing that,

we'll be building a Tower of Babel that will not please God

However, if we open ourselves to something new –

perhaps using Bible Study to listen for God's direction,

perhaps gathering together simply to pray about God's will and wait for God's answer,

perhaps attending the relational evangelism workshop this Thursday –

then I promise you

the Spirit will do amazing things in each of your lives and in our life together.

As I work on getting over my emotional attachment to my old van

and my resistance to my new one,

I will be praying that each one of us

would get over our emotional attachment to the old model of the church that no longer works

and our resistance to the new model that does.

And I will be praying that each one of us would wait and watch and pray

for the Spirit to come in a new and powerful and life-giving way

that would leave all of us amazed and astounded – and filled with joy, **Amen**