

## **Pentecost People: Living by the Power of the Spirit**

*A Sermon Preached for Calvary Baptist Church*

Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 3:14-21

Sunday, August 26

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

Gospel Singer Marion Williams was born in Miami, Florida in 1927. Her father was a butcher, a barber, and a music teacher, and her mother was a laundress. Although she was one of 11 siblings, Marion was actually one of only three who survived past their first year of life. Her father died when she was 9, and by the age of 14, Marion left school to support her family by working as a maid because her mother had lost both legs to diabetes. But it was around that time that Marion discovered her true passion: signing.

Marion sang at church, on street corners, and at tent revivals. She soon became known all across the country for her powerful voice, performing on Broadway and at Carnegie Hall, and she went on to travel the world in various plays and signing groups. In 1993, Williams became the first gospel singer to receive a Kennedy Center honor, and her tribute that evening included performances by Billy Preston, Little Richard, and the late Aretha Franklin.

Shortly before her death in 1994, Marion was interviewed on the radio show Fresh Air by Terry Gross on NPR. Marion talks about her life journey and her faith – and her humility and genuine spirit are so apparent throughout the conversation. But quickly into the interview, you also discover something surprising about her. Williams actually has a soft, relatively measured and quiet speaking voice, which is pretty unexpected for someone who has sung so boldly and passionately all around the world.

And in one of the most memorable moments of the interview, Terry Gross says, “Marion, I think a lot of our listeners might be wondering how a woman with such a big, powerful singing voice has such a comparatively small speaking voice?” Marion laughs and says, “I always wondered that myself. I don't know why, I just don't talk very loud- I don't. But give me that singing, and I'm ready.”

So then, Terry asks, “What happens to you when you sing? What kind of change do you feel?”

And Marion says, “What happens to me? The Spirit of God, Honey! It overflows me! Illuminates me! Spirit of God, Honey! It makes a little voice big, a shy person brave, and takes an ordinary dim, little life and makes it a bright life for the world.”

Well today, and for the next few weeks at Calvary, we're going to be talking about “the Spirit of God, honey!” And about all the ways the Spirit helps us to do the things that we could never begin to imagine being able to do on our own.

Now, if you are familiar with the church calendar, you know that today is not Pentecost Sunday, when the church normally celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit into the world. Pentecost

Sunday traditionally falls 7 weeks after Easter. And on Pentecost Sunday, we tend to do some outside-the-box types of things in worship.

We might wave red banners representing the Spirit. We might pray in different languages, representing how the Spirit knows no boundaries. But then, we like to put all the decorations and excitement back inside the box – after all, we don’t want to get too carried away, and so we tuck them away until next year.

But this summer, as our team was planning together for worship, we thought – what would happen if we took Pentecost back out of the box this fall? And perhaps more importantly, what would it look like for us to be Pentecost People – people, like Marion Williams, who sing with the power of the Spirit of God, honey – and people who live with the power of the Spirit of God all year long?

And so for the next few weeks in worship, we are going to be taking a closer look at some of the Pentecost texts in the Book of Acts and other places in Scripture that help us to discover more about the work of the Spirit in our world. Because just like the first four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) tell us the good news of what God does through Jesus – the book of Acts and other parts of the new Testament tell us the good news of what God does through the Holy Spirit.

In today’s text from the very first chapter of the book of Acts, just as Jesus is ascending to heaven, the disciples ask if it’s time for them to come with him. And Jesus says to them, “No, you don’t get to know God’s timing. But what you do get is the Holy Spirit. And you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all over Judea and Samaria, even to the ends of the world.” These are Jesus’ last words on this earth as told in the book of Acts.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve heard these words many times. Jesus’ last words in Matthew’s gospel were actually inscribed on the wall at the entrance of my church growing up, and I knew them like the back of my hand. But when we are studying a text that might be familiar to us already, it’s always wise to ask ourselves, “What have I not seen here before? What am I missing? How might God be speaking a new word to me through this text?” And this time, as I reflected on these words, a new word suddenly jumped off the page at me that I had never noticed before. “Power”

Jesus turns toward this anxious, timid group of disciples, who are looking at each other wide-eyed and mystified, asking themselves, “what-in-the-world-are-we-going-to-do-next?” And Jesus says to them, “Don’t worry - you’re going to have some help after I leave. You don’t have it yet, but when the Holy Spirit comes, you are going to receive “power.”

Brian Peterson, Professor of New Testament, points out that “The language here is [actually] reminiscent of Gabriel’s words to Mary in Luke 1,” where Gabriel says to her, “The Holy Spirit

will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”

In Luke 1, the power of the Spirit of God brings about the birth of Christ. And in Acts 1, the power of the Spirit of God leads to the birth of the church.<sup>1</sup>

And so, church, do we know that we have power of the Spirit? And if so, how might you describe it? For some of us, it's that extra dose of courage we receive to do the things we could never imagine doing on our own. It's that conviction in our heart when we know we're doing something wrong. It's that feeling in our gut that is always guiding our way, even when we can't understand it ourselves by any human logic or reasoning. For some of us, it's what helps us to keep getting out of bed in the morning, to keep putting one foot in front of another. Or maybe it's that adrenaline rush that runs through our body before we do something that we know is right, but it's definitely not easy. Or maybe it's that deep breath of fresh air that fills our lungs, giving us the peace of mind to keep going.

We can call it lots of different things, but as Marion Williams says “It's the Spirit of God, honey. It makes a little voice big, a shy person brave, and takes an ordinary dim, little life and makes it a bright life for the world.” And as Jesus reminds us before he ascends to heaven, the Spirit of God gives us power.

I'm sure you've noticed that we have a few balloons in the sanctuary today – and you're wondering, what in the world are we going to do with those. We will let you know, don't worry. As I was working on this sermon, I began to imagine what it would have been like if you and I had been asked to blow up all of these balloons today. It would have taken a lot of huffing and puffing - but with this many people, I think we could have done it.

But, even after all that hard work, the balloons wouldn't be floating in the air like they are now, would they? No, our balloons would be bouncing around on the ground.

And what if you and I had also been asked to keep all of these balloons floating in the air after we blew them up? We could probably make that happen too – or at least for some of the balloons, for a period of the time.

We could have a giant balloon party, and I can already see us jumping up and down tossing balloons to one another across the sanctuary. Throwing them off the balcony. Across the aisles. Even out of the baptistery. And we could take some funny videos of ourselves and say, look at all the fun we're having. We can keep all these balloons going at Calvary. Aren't we great. Look at what wonderful things we can do in this place.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1629](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1629)

And then, I would imagine that after a few minutes of fun, we would begin to get tired. And slowly, we would begin to let the balloons drop, one by one. And after awhile, we would leave worship with a floor covered with balloons and think – well, that was a fun.

I can't help but wonder if this is how we act sometimes, perhaps without even realizing it? I wonder if we're spending our time throwing around balloons that we've blown up all on our own, that we're constantly trying to keep in the air around us. We can pride ourselves on being busy and accomplished – both individually AND as a church. And then we look at ourselves and say – how great are we? Look at what we can do?

I wonder if you and I can get so preoccupied with doing good and even wonderful things, that we forget that there is another way. A better way – as Jesus tells Martha while she is stressfully scurrying around the kitchen trying to keep everything going. We forget that there is a power available to us – and that it is not our own.

That's why we didn't ask you to fill up all the balloons today and to keep them up in the air. Instead, we chose to fill the balloons with helium. We chose to fill the balloons with a something you and I can not create on our own, no matter how hard we try. Because it's helium, not human breath, that gives balloons the power to float. And by no power or effort of our own, there are almost 300 balloons floating above us today. We didn't have to huff and puff to blow them up. We're not having to jump up and down to keep them floating in the air.

And I can't help but think that this is what trusting the spirit is like. Trusting a power that we cannot create or manufacture within ourselves to do something we could never possibly do on our own.

Now, that doesn't mean there's not any work required on our part to follow where the Spirit leads. Carla Almeida and a whole team of volunteers were here early this morning filling balloons with helium, tying them up, and preparing for our worship time today. It required a lot of hard work. But when they used that helium tank, they were trusting something separate from themselves to finish the job.

And that's what trusting the Spirit requires of us, too. Yes, it still involves hard work on our part. As Galatians reminds us, we are not to become weary in well-doing" and as Colossians says, "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus." There is work involved in following the Spirit. But, there also comes a point where we need to open wide the valves of the spiritual helium tank and trust the power of the Spirit to show up and to do the things we can't even begin to imagine doing on our own.

And I believe we see flickers of the Spirit's power at work around us all the time. I believe we saw it this summer, when we met our goal for Journey On in mid-July and completely finished paying off our remaining building debt in the dead of summer. Who could have imagined that would happen, when less than a year ago we actually reduced our overall budget by 15%? It's

absolutely incredible. But It wasn't by our power, Calvary. I whole-heartedly believe that it was by the power of the Spirit. It's the Spirit of God, honey.

I believe our youth experienced this when they served this summer in Colorado Springs – each of them receiving the power to get out of their comfort zones, to connect with children they'd never met before, and to minister in some pretty incredible ways. It's the Spirit of God, honey.

I experienced it earlier this year after we had to reschedule our Spring Break mission trip to the border. We were disappointed but trusted that God had a plan for us to go another time, when I just happened to meet Pastor Melba Zapata at a conference the next week and we began to dream about a partnership between our churches. And the timing couldn't have been more perfect for our mission team to serve alongside them this summer. It's the Spirit of God, honey.

And I think we experienced it last week when we walked into a sanctuary filled with backpacks and school supplies for West Avenue – and we were even able to completely surprise the principal with a check from our surplus to bless his school community. No, this was not by our power, Calvary. It's the Spirit of God, honey.

Barbara Brown Taylor says it this way. In the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit performs what she calls “an artificial resuscitation on a room full of well-intentioned bumbler, turning them into a force that changed the history of the world. The question for me,” she says, “is whether we still believe in a God who acts like that. Do we still believe in a God with power to transform us, both as individuals and as a people, or have we come to an unspoken agreement that our God is pretty old and tired by now, someone to whom we may address our prayer requests but not anyone we really expect to change our lives?”<sup>2</sup>

Friends, do we expect the Spirit of God to change our lives? To transform our church? Do we believe that by God's power at work within us – the Spirit of God can do abundantly more than we could ever dare to ask or image?

If so, the question I want us to ask ourselves today is this: What do you need the Spirit to empower you to do next? What brokenness in your life do you need the Spirit to heal? Into what grief or sadness do you need the Spirit to breathe hope and new life? What relationship in your life do you need the Spirit to restore? What sin in your life do you need the Spirit to help you overcome? In what situation in your life do you need the Spirit to give you the courage to be brave? In what seemingly impossible situation in your life do you need the Spirit to show up in a completely impossible way?

Because if the Spirit of Christ lives in you, friends, you've got the power! “It makes a little voice big, a shy person brave, and takes an ordinary dim, little life and makes it a bright life for the world. It's the Spirit of God, honey.”

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<sup>2</sup> *The Gospel of the Holy Spirit*,  
[https://www.unitedparishbrookline.org/sites/default/files/pentecost\\_c\\_2016\\_barbara\\_brown\\_taylor.pdf](https://www.unitedparishbrookline.org/sites/default/files/pentecost_c_2016_barbara_brown_taylor.pdf)