Holy Jazz

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Acts 2:1-12

Sermon Series: Life is Messy

Pentecost opened the door for us to have a personal, intimate, individual, and supernatural experience of God through the Holy Spirit.

That first Pentecost, we find the disciples waiting for the coming of the Spirit, as Jesus had instructed them to do. Not only was the community of Christ’s followers gathered together, but also, throngs of people were in Jerusalem to celebrate a Jewish feast day called Pentecost, which literally means 50 days, so-called because it came fifty days after Passover. In this context, God sends the Spirit upon his people in a remarkable and perceptible way but left the people asking, “What does this mean?”

We’re going to explore that question today, using jazz as an illustration to help us understand what really happened that first Pentecost. And to begin, I want to play two minutes of the opening of Ken Burns’s documentary on jazz to capture the themes that come together for us. Listen. This film clip highlights some of the elements of jazz that help us understand the meaning of Pentecost and life in the Spirit.

We heard that “jazz rewards individual expression” and “it is an improvisational art.” In classical music, the musician is celebrated for playing a piece exactly the way it is written. But in jazz, the skilled performer will interpret a tune in very individual ways, never playing the same composition exactly the same way twice. Depending upon the performer's personal experience, interactions with other musicians, or even members of the audience, a jazz musician may alter melodies, harmonies, or time signature at will.

That’s a great illustration for what happened at Pentecost, making possible a new way of life—life in the Spirit. What happened that first Pentecost was not unfamiliar to these Jews, because wind and fire are common biblical symbols for the activity of the Spirit. What was new was the personal, individual experience of the filling of the Holy Spirit. As verse three pointed out, “Divided tongues, as of fire…rested on each of them.”

In the Old Testament, the divine presence rested on Israel as a corporate entity and upon many of its leaders for special purposes. Pentecost opened the door for us to have a personal, intimate, individual, and supernatural experience of God through the Holy Spirit. We might say, “Life in the Spirit brings endless opportunities for individual expression and
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improvisation in our everyday, ordinary lives.”

Remember, as God in the flesh, Jesus’ earthly life was limited to a particular time and place. Jesus could only teach, heal and help those in his physical presence. The coming of the Holy Spirit enables us today to experience the real, living presence of God in our lives—right here, right now—in whatever time, place, or circumstance we find ourselves.

The Spirit indwells all those who trust in Jesus and is powerfully working to transform us to make us the kind of people who are able to live the life God created and redeemed us to live. We cannot do that in our own human striving.

As we trust God to fill us with His Spirit, we will become the kind of person who reflects the characteristics of Jesus—the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. You might say that the individual expression and improvisation that comes from life in the Spirit means “Learning to live my life as Jesus would live it if he were I” [Dallas Willard].

Later in this service, students will confirm their baptism. Pentecost Sunday is a great day to do that because, in essence, you students are saying, “My life will be an individual expression and improvisation of my relationship with Jesus. I am going to live each moment for God, listening to God, learning to live my life as Jesus would live it if he were I.”

I love this quote: “When you see a jazz musician playing, you’re looking at a pioneer, you’re looking at an explorer, you’re looking at an experimenter, you’re looking at a scientist, and you’re looking at all those things because it’s the creative process incarnate” (Albert Murray).

Whatever our gifts, abilities, talents, or vocational callings may be, we live life in the Spirit by learning to live our lives like Jesus and participating in Christ’s ongoing creative and redemptive ministry in our own lives and in the world.

Now I do not want to mistakenly communicate that individual expression and improvisations means doing anything we want. Notice what the film clip said: “Jazz is forever changing but nearly always rooted in the blues. It has a rich tradition and its own rules, but it is brand new every night.” Think of it. Great music isn’t made by people who sit down and pound out anything on the piano or simply blow air through pipes. Beautiful music is made by skilled musicians who have intentionally spent countless hours studying their art and practicing their instrument to become the kind of person who is able to play music well.
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As jazz is rooted in tradition and basic rules of musical structure and composition, so our life in the Spirit is rooted in the Word. Following the passage we just read is a lengthy sermon given by Peter. Let’s listen to a few verses from Acts 2:17-18: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”

We see in Peter’s sermon that the coming of the Holy Spirit was the fulfillment of a prophecy by Joel, indicating that our life in the Spirit is rooted in scripture: the written word of God. Peter knew the Old Testament scriptures, and he was able to connect this phenomenon—this experience of the coming of the Holy Spirit—with prophecies that had been given centuries before to God’s people. Friends, our lives need to be rooted in scripture. As followers of Christ, we must know the mind, the heart and the will of God as revealed in His written word. A hunger to know God’s word is a sign of God’s Spirit working in our lives.

Later in the service, the students being confirmed will receive a Bible. This is significant because “learning to live my life as Jesus would live it if he were I” always involves the ongoing study of God’s word. We never stop needing to listen to God’s voice. The Spirit uses the word of God to speak to us, to transform us, and to guide us for our lives.

Our life in the Spirit also needs to be rooted in Christ: the Living Word of God. Christ is the heart of the Scripture. Everything in the Bible either looks forward to Christ or flows from Christ. If you examine Peter’s preaching on Pentecost, you will see that it was full of Christ—his incarnation, life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. That is why the sermon is so great! Peter knew these events of Christ’s life because he lived them with Christ. You and I need to know Christ and understand the significance of Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The way we do that is by reading through the Gospels again and again.

I really want to encourage you to prayerfully consider participating in one of the Christianity Explored groups being offered now. If you haven’t had a learning opportunity that explores the person and work of Christ from the gospels, then don’t wait. Take advantage of this opportunity being offered because really knowing Christ—who he is and what he has done for us—is key to being rooted and living life in the Spirit.
The film clip went on to state, “Jazz rewards individual expression, but it also demands selfless collaboration.” Notice in the Acts passage that people were not living and waiting for the promise of the Spirit all by themselves. They were “all together in one place,” helping us to understand that life in the Spirit is lived in community.

While each of us is given the gift of the Holy Spirit, it is important to note that ours is not an individual faith. There are no lone-ranger Christians. We not only belong to God, we belong to each other. In his book, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “Christian community… already exists in Christ. It is not an ideal which we must realize, it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. It is a spiritual and not a psychic reality in that it is created by the Spirit.” The community of believers in Acts is remarkable because they live in selfless collaboration with each other, sharing life together, sharing what they have with each other and with those in need.

The film clip said, “Jazz is about just making a living, taking terrible risks, losing everything and finding love…. It has always reflected Americans—all Americans—at their best.” We might say life in the Spirit is about the same thing. The community of Acts demonstrated this beautifully. It is a picture of Christians at their best. Life in the Spirit invites us into this “losing everything and finding love” community way of life.

One of the remarkable features of this community is the breaking down of barriers. We already saw how prophecy pointed to the Spirit coming on young and old, men and women, slave and free, but perhaps what is the most astounding feature is the multicultural nature of the body of Christ. The film clip also pointed out that “Jazz is America’s music—born out of a unique experience of cultures coming together—Old Africa and Old Europe—and it could have only happened in an entirely New World.” Jazz really comes out of a multicultural context, and that is why jazz is such a great illustration of what happened at Pentecost. Life in the Spirit breaks down the walls of racial and cultural barriers to establish a new community.

On that first Pentecost, each person heard what was being said in his own language, indicating that Pentecost reverses what happened at Babel. Remember, those people wrongly believed they needed to build up a tower to the heaven in search of the significance they lost in the Garden of Eden. And, before the coming of the Spirit, people had to keep coming back to one place, the temple in Jerusalem, to worship God in one language, namely Hebrew. In Christ, we have
been redeemed and our significance has been restored. And with Pentecost and the coming of the Spirit, we are free to go to the far corners of the earth and worship God in our own languages.

This multicultural nature of the body of Christ is important because we live in a world torn by cultural disharmony. Just think of the Middle East, Sudan, Bosnia, Rwanda—and, of course, the history of jazz highlights the racial issues of our own nation. The history of humanity is about people trying to dominate others and trying to subjugate them to their will and their way. But one pastor has asked: “Is there a power that can unify the divided nations of the earth without subjugating them? Is there a way of making people one, without at the same time making them all the same? It is precisely that sort of unity which the Holy Spirit brings. The Pentecostal tongues were a pointer to the way in which the Holy Spirit was going to break down social barriers and create an unprecedented kind of internationalism. Unlike the imperialism of men, the Spirit had no ambition to homogenize the peoples of the world into a uniform Christian culture. Instead, the Spirit created ‘a new kind of social identity altogether’—the ‘fellowship of the Holy Spirit.’”

Thus, in the book of Acts, we see the growth of the “one church in diverse cultures.” Life in the Spirit breaks down the walls of racial barriers to establish a new community. All of this looks forward to the day when there will be, as Revelation 7:9 says, “…a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb….”

We must never forget that we are part of a worldwide community in which the human barriers do not exist. And so we must cultivate an attitude of concern for all peoples—not just those like us. We must struggle to combat racism in every form and the poverty that is so often connected with it. We must care about the human rights of all—even in faraway lands. And, of course, we must labor with the worldwide church to take the good news of the gospel to every person in every place around this globe. This is the powerful work of the Spirit to bring people together.

And allow me a side note. If the Spirit is so big to do this seemingly impossible global task, then whatever barriers you may be experiencing in your relationships, your circumstances, the power of the Spirit can work to overcome them in your marriage, your family life, your work environment, your neighborhood. God’s Spirit can bring healing, and restoration, and reconciliation, and hope in every circumstance of our lives. This is who God is. This is what the Spirit does.
Finally, as we come to the last point, I’ll share my favorite quote from the clip. The drummer Art Blakey liked to say, “Jazz, washes away the dust of everyday life. Above all, it swings.” You may not like jazz. You may not like dancing. That’s okay. What I want you to understand is that like jazz, life in the Spirit is about movement—the movement of the Holy Spirit, who washes away the dust of everyday life, bringing love and joy and peace and exuberance and excitement because God is present with us in the person of the Spirit who is powerfully working to do in and through and for us what we could not do on our own.

The Spirit moves to transform us into the image of Christ. The Spirit moves to speak God’s living and active word to us. The Spirit moves us to pray. The Spirit moves us to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in our hearts. The Spirit moves us to live a life worthy of our calling. The Spirit moves us out of our comfort zones. The Spirit moves to reconcile and build community. The Spirit moves to share what we have with others. The Spirit moves us to share the good news with those who do not know. The Spirit moves us to do the greater works that Jesus said we would do. In the words of trombonist J. J. Johnson, “Jazz is restless. It won’t stay put and it never will.”

Life in the Spirit is like that. The Spirit is constantly moving to transform us to become the kind of people who are able to do what Jesus said. The Spirit moved the disciples out of their comfort zone into a hostile world to witness to the love and goodness of God in Christ. In Acts 1:8, Jesus said: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

The same Holy Spirit is moving and continuing the work of Christ on earth. The Spirit empowers us to take the gospel to the ends of the earth and to heed Jesus’ words: “Love one another as I have loved you….Love your neighbor as yourself.”

I’m hoping this sermon is sounding a little familiar to you. Life in the Spirit is about being transformed so that we can individually express and improvise God’s good will in our everyday, ordinary lives. Life in the Spirit is about being a part of community that extends beyond barriers of race and class and color and nationality, uniting us in Christ to one another. Life in the Spirit is about moving out to love others and extending the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth. Life in the Spirit is “Becoming like Christ Together for the World.” That mission is possible because of the pres-
Pentecost made possible a way of life—life in the Spirit—that enables us to participate in the ongoing ministry of Jesus in the world right here and now.