

“The Who, What, Why, and The Spirit”  
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
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Acts 2:1-11; John 14

Who am I? The question of identity haunts all of us at some point. The young wonder what to with their lives. Marriage and parenthood induce a reassessment of who we are. The empty-nester ponders how to fill the silence as grown children vacate the premises. The recently retired must find an entirely new rhythm for their days. A person grieving struggles with the emptiness of loss, and how to move forward with life. All of these situations inspire reflection on our identity.

When we ask that question, “Who am I?” we think about the network of relationships we share. I am a father, a brother, a son, a husband. We consider our role in the broader community, occupationally and otherwise. I am a priest, a preacher, a pastor, a neighbor. We reflect on our attributes. I am middle-aged, middle-class, politically moderate.

Closely connected to the question of identity is the sense of meaning we desire for our lives. We want our parenting to result in healthy, happy offspring. We wish for success in our occupations. We aspire to achieve, to leave a legacy, to make a positive impact on our community.

As Christians, our identity and meaning are bound up in a story: a story of loving sacrifice, of giving and receiving gifts; a story of frightful power and possibility that brings hope and peace, and a little nervousness.

Today, we celebrate Pentecost, the occasion when the Holy Spirit descended upon the original disciples in a unique way, enabling them to exercise a ministry that has irrevocably altered our lives, the world in which we live, and how we look at both. This event was the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that he would not abandon us. Even though the cross would kill him, Jesus would rise again, and even though he would ascend into heaven, the presence of Jesus would remain, through the Spirit, embodied in us.

The affect of this promise and its fulfillment on our identity and the meaning of our lives can hardly be described. The Spirit given to us changes everything: our perspective; every relationship we enjoy, and some that we don't; our motives and priorities. Nothing escapes the implications of what it means to be a Spirit-filled people.

However, it doesn't always feel that way. We tend to define our identity and find meaning through other realities, when in fact, the presence of the Spirit creates a new reality that both includes and transcends all that we are, all that we have, and all that we do. This can be scary. As the author of Hebrews wrote, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." While we like the idea of being spiritually powerful, dreaming of what we might do with it, power scares us, and rightfully so. The risks of exercising power can make us tremble.

This is brought to our attention starkly in the words of Jesus. "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these." We all know that the power Jesus exercised made him both despised and popular. Eventually, it led him to great suffering. His proclamation that we share the same power through the Spirit makes us hesitate. The implications of power – the responsibilities and the undesirable results – are intimidating.

Yet as faithful Christians, we have no choice, because to follow Jesus means allowing that spiritual power to flow through us unimpeded, guided not by our own preferences, but by the purpose of God. That purpose is somewhat mysterious, and outside of pulp fiction or a suspenseful movie, we aren't terribly fond of mysteries, because they elude our control.

It's worth it, though. The risk, the pain, the uncomfortable unpredictability – all completely worth it – because when the Spirit flows through us, we understand who we are and our lives gain a meaning that nothing else can give. As the Spirit moves through us, we find peace in the place of fear. Joy triumphs over despair, and worry about the prospect of losing it all recedes, because when we let the Spirit loose, we tacitly die to whatever once obsessed us, and our lives are renewed, transformed, dedicated to the sacred purpose of unfettered love.

What this looks like day to day for our Church and for each individual member of it varies considerably. We can never fully account for how the Spirit works. As Jesus said of the Spirit, “the wind blows where it chooses.” Sometimes, the Spirit works out God's purpose through us in ways we notice only in hindsight, and sometimes, we are aware that the Spirit is moving us, though we're not entirely sure where. It requires prayerful discernment to sense the presence and the purpose of God through the Spirit. We need disciplined hearts and minds, the accountability of community, and a humble courage to see life in new ways. None of this is easy, but very little that's truly worthwhile ever is, and nothing matters more than receiving with gratitude and exercising with gladness the powerful spiritual gifts God so eagerly wants to bestow upon us.

Pause to think for a moment how it might feel, what it might look like, if each of us individually, and collectively as a body, were to open ourselves just a little more to the Spirit. How might our daily lives and the life of the world around us be transformed if we acted more faithfully as conduits of God's grace? Certainly, we have seen in part the wonders that can be wrought, but have we only scratched the surface of what can be possible when we open our hearts a little more to the Spirit, and let it flow through us? Give those questions a little thought this week. What would it mean for who you are, who we are? What might it mean for the world entire? Amen.