

Pentecost: The Spirit of Boldness

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle

Prayer of Illumination

Spirit of God,
Discern in our hearts—
The will you would have us desire,
The love you would have us shower upon our world,
And *the grace* that frees us
to bask in your kindness and mercy
that we in turn extend to others. Amen.

Background

How do you respond in moments of danger, distress, disapproval or being just plain dissed?

Depression?
Discouragement?
Displeasure?

For the Christian, our response is determination and divine doggedness. Martin Luther was once threatened by a papal envoy, saying that if he kept disobeying the church, all his supporters would leave him. *Where will you be then Luther?*

"Then as now," answered Martin Luther, "in the hands of God."

That's the Spirit of Boldness—a deep trust that we'll always be in the hands of a loving God, even if the powers that be are none too pleased.

Our passage we're about to read talks about the nations *raging* against the Lord. The Greek word for *rage* used here was most often used for the "whinnying and neighing" of horses. Don't be a ninny when society whinnies!

Never forget: The Holy Spirit is the Horse Whisperer. The Holy Spirit is the Whinny Whisperer.

The Spirit helps us be a YEASAYER in the midst of the neighing of the NEAHSAYERS. Our God is the Creator of both the whinnying horses and the neighing horses.

So the apostles were confronted by whinnying horses, that instructed them to refrain from speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus. So they put John and Peter in prison for the night. *Any guess their response?* Punish our enemies? Alleviate our pain? Nope.

"We cannot give up speaking about what we have seen and heard."

Let's hear now what the apostles did after being released from prison.

Scripture: Acts 4: 23-31 (NRSV)

After they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant:

'Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples imagine vain things?
The kings of the earth took their stand,
and the rulers have gathered together
against the Lord and against his Messiah.'

For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Pentecost: The Spirit of Boldness

Author and blogger Mark Manson writes about the great war hero from Poland, Witold Pilecki. He was a decorated officer in the Polish-Soviet War of 1918. And this dude was a stud. When the war ended, he retired to the Polish countryside, married a school teacher, and had two kids. He rode horses, wore fancy hats, and smoked cigars. Life was good for Pilecki.

Then Hitler happened. In just over a month Poland lost its entire territory. Nazis invaded in the west, the Soviets invaded in the east. Both were ruthless to the Polish people. Poland was between a rock and a hard place.

Pilecki fought against both the Nazis and the Soviets. And Poland was defeated. But Pilecki and his fellow Polish officers refused to raise the white flag. They formed the Secret Polish Army and kept their white and red Polish flag flying high in their hearts.

In the spring of 1940, the Secret Polish Army had heard rumors of a massive prison complex that would later be known as Auschwitz. As more and more Polish people went missing that summer, Pilecki and his fellow officers suspected they were being sent to Auschwitz.

Pilecki volunteered to sneak INTO Auschwitz. Not OUT OF Auschwitz, but *INTO* Auschwitz.

He would allow himself to get arrested, and once in the camp, would organize with other Polish soldiers to coordinate a mutiny and concoct a prison break. His superiors told Pilecki he was crazy and didn't let him go. But things kept getting worse and worse. The officers relented and let Pilecki engineer his prison break-in and prison break-out of Auschwitz.

Pilecki is the only known man to ever willingly enter a Nazi concentration camp. It didn't take long to see that things in Auschwitz were much worse than anyone imagined. The shootings and manual labor were literally hell on earth. Yet despite the odds Pilecki formed:

- An intelligence network by embedding messages in laundry baskets.
- Built a transistor radio out of spare parts and stolen batteries.
- Created smuggling rings to bring food, medicine, and clothing to prisoners.
- And was able to communicate his escape plans to the outside world.

Over a two-year period, Pilecki built an entire resistance movement within the camp—with chains of command, ranks and officers, a logistics network, and lines of communication outside the camp. His plan was to raise up a revolt within the camp.

And then the Jews started coming into Auschwitz.

Tens of thousands Jews murdered each day. Pilecki radioed to the Secret Polish Army to liberate the camp. At least bomb the gas chambers. The authorities got his message and assumed he was exaggerating. They thought that nothing could be that messed up. Nothing could be this evil. Nothing.

Pilecki was the first person to alert the world to the Holocaust. His reports eventually made it to Eisenhower and Churchill. These leaders also thought he was exaggerating. Pilecki realized no one was going to believe him.

Not the Secret Polish Army. Not the British. Not the Americans. He decided it was time to escape. He made it look effortless. He faked an illness and got admitted into the camp's hospital. He then lied to the doctors about the work group he was supposed to return to, saying he worked in the bakery, which also happened to be at the edge of the camp, near the river.

He worked at the bakery until 2:00 a.m., until the last batch came out of the oven. From there, he cut the telephone wire, pried open the back door, changed into stolen civilian clothes, sprinted to the river and was able to dodge the guard's flying bullets that whizzed past him. Pilecki navigated his way back to civilization.

And he was one of the bravest men to ever walk the earth.

Sovereign Lord, Creator of heaven and earth, give us:

A Spirit of boldness
A courageous confidence

The Pentecostal power of the Holy Spirit helps us do what needs to be done. What must be done. What no one else wants to do. To witness to what nobody yet believes.

With the Holy Ghost, you not only can face your giants. You can face your inner and outer demons, even when your stomach is in knots because you're scared spitless. Kind of reminds me of the Greek Orthodox artwork that depicts hell. In nearly every piece of art containing hell, you see Jesus right there—snatching people out of the flames. Jesus, saving them from the fire! Not consigning them to the fire, but rescuing them!

Immanuel, that's my Jesus. The Holy Spirit empowers Christ to minister through us. The Spirit inspires us to seek and save the lost sheep on a rescue mission. The Spirit helps us to courageously stand up and speak out the good news of Jesus Christ.

Let's revisit Acts 4.

Upon release from prison, Peter and John met with their trusted Christian support network. We need our friends in Christ to make it through tough times.

Together, the believers raised their voices and called upon the Sovereign God and Creator of all for power to be bold in witness. The Spirit frees us from being timid people pleasers—afraid of others—from being slaves to public opinion or being liked. Of course we want to be respectful, but at the end of the day, we live before an audience of One—the living God.

The apostles knew it wasn't about them. It was about God's holy servant Jesus, the Messiah, the Anointed One of God ... who was still serving and saving and healing. They didn't whine about not having favor from the government. In fact they knew opposition to Jesus came with the territory. Opposition was a sign that they were following Christ, not Caesar.

As they were praying, the place they were gathered was shaken or as one translation puts it, "rocked." The Spirit rocks our world. They were filled with the Holy Spirit, and spoke the word of God with boldness, even in the face of adversity.

Immanuel—let's be full of it. Full of the Holy Spirit.

To close, this is my challenge to all of us, Immanuel: Are you an Aquarium Fish or a Deep-Sea Fish?

Aquarium fish have it made. They can swim, breed, and obtain food without having to lift a fin. They also have the luxury of being protected from predators. But this cush life does have its downside—aquarium fish are notorious for being excruciatingly sensitive to the slightest disturbances in the fishbowl. These fish are high maintenance and temperamental—basically the Kardashians of the fish world. Aquarium fish need the aquarium keeper to regularly clean the tank, change the water, feed them, check the temperature, and watch the pH. Aquarium fish freak out when everything isn't *just so*.

However, life as a deep-sea fish is much trickier and less glamorous. Deep-sea fish are more like the MacGyver of fishdom than the Kardashians. They live in a natural ecosystem. They have to work harder to sustain themselves. They're subject to more threats and danger. But this exposure to the elements out in the wild teaches deep-sea fish how to cope with variation in the real world—changing water temperature, scarcity of food, predators, etc. As a result, deep sea fish are more robust when faced with challenges—they can adapt to the changes in their environment and thrive.

We humans are a lot like aquarium fish. We prefer to be sheltered from danger. We like to have disturbances kept to a minimum. We want to avoid pain and enjoy our happiness and creature comforts. Our natural default is to see church or even society as our fishbowl that's safe, stable, well-maintained, and insulated. It's tempting to think that we're doing a favor to our children or disciples of Jesus by ever nervously following after them, sheltering them from any form of risk or ideas that might unsettle them.

Immanuel, I want to be a deep-sea fish. I may want to be a wild cod fish, but I never want to coddle my kids or Christians. The Spirit comforts us, but never coddles us.

The good news is that Jesus has a different plan for us than merely being our divine aquarium keeper. He's calling us out of our comfort zones and out into the wild to follow him in his mission in the world. Being a Jesus-follower is more *deep-sea faith* than *aquarium faith*.

Immanuel, let's swim away from the Sirens of stability, certainty, and the status quo. What do you say we go against the current, against the flow? Let's leave the shallow end and swim for the deep end. Let's give our spiritual sea legs a workout. When we venture out into the troubled waters (rather than just the still waters), we're opened up to change, adaptation, innovation, and growth.

In the words of Alan Roxburgh, the Spirit of God in these new waters

"calls forth and unleashes the missional imagination of the people of God."

In what ways is God wanting to transport with a heavenly fish net from the aquarium and plop you into the deep sea? In what ways is the Spirit beckoning Immanuel out of the shallow end and to be more and more of a deep-end and deep-sea church?

When others see our faith in action, may they say we're doing *just swimmingly*, my fellow fishers of people!

And may we all be the Messiah's holy macerals, Immanuel!

Amen.

The New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.