Dear Siblings in Christ,

Grace to you and peace from God, the Holy Spirit empowerer of love and life in us all. Amen

Sometimes when we hear this Pentecost story from Acts, we imagine it as some sort of body snatcher experience. The disciples are locked in a room doing their thing, minding their business. Then suddenly, wham! The Holy Spirit shows up and takes over their bodies and minds and makes them do things they really didn’t have the ability to do. We envision them losing control of themselves – which is probably what scares us about the Spirit – and doing weird things like speaking in strange languages with little fires bouncing over their heads. We wonder if this is a story about God using the disciples as puppets, doing things they are completely unprepared to do.

Peter immediately works to disprove this body snatcher image by getting up to preach a sermon, a rather long sermon, to all who are listening. “We aren’t drunk,” he announces. “And we know what we’re doing. Listen to what I have to say. I speak to you confidently. We are witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection.”

What he shows to the people is not a man out of control or a puppet, but a man empowered and emboldened, a man filled with a Holy Spirit who saturates the followers of Christ with the confidence and courage, the words and fortitude, the faith, hope, love and joy they need in order to do what they have already been equipped to do: proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and live it into their world in its fullness.

I mean just look at Peter’s sermon throughout the rest of Acts 2: the good news of Jesus Christ is front and center, with some law and challenge thrown in. In this sermon, Peter announces what God has done in Christ for all, making him Lord and Messiah, raising him from the dead, pouring out the Spirit so that all can see and hear, forgiving sins, announcing the day of the Lord’s salvation. “Don’t you see,” Peter says, “This is all part of the last days. This is the promise of salvation in Jesus for you and for all generations near and far despite the fact that you crucified him.”

And all the things Peter said had a big effect on the people listening. Many are cut to the heart – trapped in their guilt. “What can we do?!” they cry.

“Repent. Change. Turn back to God and be baptized so that your sins will be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit just like us.” Just like us.

And what were the results of Peter’s sermon? Well, the results every preacher dreams of: 3000 people are baptized (that must have been one long worship service). They are filled with awe and their lives are completely changed. Those who believed lived together, sharing their possessions, selling what was necessary when anyone had need. They worshipped and ate together with glad and generous hearts, with the goodwill of the people.

Now while what Peter and the disciples did that day was not usual human behavior, neither was it something so out of this world that they didn’t take part in it. They were there, actively participating in the work of God in that moment. What the Spirit did that day did indeed transform them, but the Spirit did not steal who they were as human beings.

Instead, what the Spirit did is made them into what Jesus already called and trained them to be: followers of Christ. Jesus had already equipped them and given them the tools and resources they needed to be not just his followers but his ministers of the gospel in the world. For three years, Jesus had been their teacher, mentor, example, encourager. For three years, Jesus taught them how to follow him, to preach, to teach, to heal, to love and live in his way, not the world’s way. For three years he taught them things like love God, love your neighbor, love your enemy. Deal with the log in your own eye before going after the speck in someone elses’ eyes. Lose your life to gain your life. Being first is being last. I will die and rise again so that you can too. Care for the least of these. Don’t worry, be not afraid. Pray like this, “OUR Father…” My peace I leave with you.

Of course, this stuff didn’t sink in right away. Even up to the day of Jesus’ ascension, the followers were still confused, uncertain, forgetful of what Jesus had already taught them. Even to the end, they were doing things that clearly showed they hadn’t been listening and making choices that showed that hadn’t sunk it. Wow, does that sound familiar!

But for three years, Jesus equipped them all (not just the 12, everyone who was following him) to seek, do, and be the healing, forgiving, radically counter-cultural love and life of God in a world that didn’t want this kind of love and life. And then Jesus sent the advocate, the teacher, the Spirit, whom he promised would help them do what he’d taught them to do after he left.

And so when the Spirit came on that Pentecost day long ago, it wasn’t to give Jesus’ followers tools that they didn’t already have; Jesus had already given them what they needed. No, the Spirit came to empower them to do what they’d already been equipped to do.

Paul makes this clear in the text from Ephesians read earlier, verses that have become our guiding theme in the synod: “For the gifts Christ gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, [some with many other roles in the church] to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ…”

The gifts have already been given and you, followers of Christ, have already been equipped. You’ve been equipped in your baptism when the Spirit was poured out upon you and you were welcomed into Christ’s community. You’ve been equipped in as much as you’ve attended worship and heard the proclamation and the scriptures read. You’ve been equipped as you have been a part of Sunday School and Confirmation classes and Adult learning and bible studies and prayer gatherings. You’ve been equipped every time you gave food to the hungry or water to the thirsty or welcomed the stranger or clothed the naked or served the neighbor in love with justice; every time you forgave a friend or an enemy; every time you consoled the suffering or lamented with the grieving. Whenever you put yourself in a position to learn the way of Christ, to practice his way of life, to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in your life, you are being equipped do the work of ministry of the gospel for the building up of the body of Christ and service to the world.

And if you feel like you haven’t been equipped yet or want more, talk to your pastor. And if you want to become even more equipped, enter the LPA program or go to seminary to learn how to best equip others. For the follower of Christ, the equipping and being equipped never ends. Even Jesus knew three years wouldn’t be enough so he sent the Holy Spirit to keep the equipping going, to equip you (yes, you! No really, you!) to be ministers for the sake of the gospel in your place and time in the world.

That is one of the primary roles of the church, to equip you and all followers of Christ – through Word and Sacrament and Service and beloved community – to be ministers of the gospel empowered and emboldened by the Spirit to build up the body of Christ. That’s not just the call of the pastor; that’s everyone’s calling as followers of Christ.

But I know there are a lot of things that get in the way of this equipping. We have other priorities, we’re so busy, there’s conflict in the church; fear, anxiety, need for personal power and the need to control others; hate, rage, despair. There are so many things in us and our world that put stumbling blocks in front of us and erect roadblocks that prevent the power of the Spirit working in our lives.

I’ve often wondered at what roadblocks or walls were getting in the way of those who sneered at the disciples that “they are full of new wine!” Something was preventing those people from hearing the good news the disciples were preaching that day. Was it terror or pride or the trauma of being trapped by an oppressive Roman empire? Was it the same hate, rage or despair that led them to crucify Jesus? Was it a stubborn refusal to repent, turn back to God, because they thought their way was the only right way?

This is a question we who would be followers of Christ should also ask ourselves regularly, both as individuals and as a church. What stumbling blocks are we laying down that would prevent us or others from being equipped for the ministry of the gospel? What roadblocks are we putting up that prevent the Holy Spirit from empowering us or others?

But even more importantly we must ask, if we are to follow Christ into God’s future for the church, how do we tear these stumbling blocks and roadblocks down and open ourselves up to the Spirit so that we too can be empowered and emboldened to be the ministers of the gospel we are called to be for the world? How do we walk humbly with God so that the Spirit can truly saturated and intoxicate us with the power of the gospel promises and equip us even further to do the ministry we all have been called to do?

For finally the promise of the Spirit is for all who would listen to the call and welcome the message of the gospel. This promise of new life, centered in the loving, forgiving, merciful love of God in Christ Jesus is right here, for you, inviting you, equipping you, empowering you, transforming you into the beloved community of Christ. A community that is loved and therefore loves, that is served and therefore serves, that receives God’s mercy and justice and therefore shares justice and mercy, that is filled with grace and therefore gives grace.

Today and everyday, the Spirit calls you into life and pours into you gifts like hope, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, all of which will empower you to “do” Christ’s life in the world. While we who would follow Christ, we who have been baptized into the Spirit and welcomed as a beloved child of God, can’t escape this new life the Spirit brings, we can hang on tight for the wild ride ahead into God’s future, trusting that we are being equipped to be and do the ministry of the gospel in and for the world. Amen.