

“Universal Charger”

Acts 2:1-21

Tesla. Chevy. Nissan. Porsche. Audi. VW. A dozen major carmakers are now building electric vehicles, and the market is expected to grow.

But there’s a problem: The charging ports are all over the cars.

When you go to a gas station to fill up your gas-powered car, you can be pretty sure that you will pump gas into the tank from the side of the car, near the rear. But where do you put the charger into your electric car?

Could be the front. Or the back. Or one of the sides.

Very confusing.

In Korea, the car-maker Hyundai recently embarked on a project of building public charging stations in Seoul, and they wanted to accommodate as many car brands as possible.

The result was the “Hyundai Hi-Charger,” and you’ll never guess what inspired its design. “Self-serve car washes.” “They have the sprayer hanging down from the top and it kind of rotates around.”

Same with the Hyundai Hi-Charger. It has a beacon, featuring a glowing halo. The halo rotates and drops the charging cable in just the right spot, depending on the make and model of your electric car.

It’s a universal charger.

The book of Acts tells us that “there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem” (2:5). Yes, there were “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs” (vv. 9-11).

Lots of brands. More variety than what you find today in electric cars.

The first followers of Jesus were just one brand of Jew: Galileans. They weren't the most highly educated residents of Jerusalem, and most people expected their language abilities to be limited. But God was at work on a surprising design.

The followers of Jesus were “all together in one place,” says the book of Acts (v. 1). The King James Version says that they were “with one accord.” They had come together to celebrate the Feast of Weeks, which was focused on God's gift of the law to the Israelites.

Suddenly from heaven “there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (vv. 2-4).

God was determined to fill them with power. The Holy Spirit came with the rush of a violent wind, like the wind from God that “swept over the face of the waters” on the first day of creation (Genesis 1:2). The Spirit danced with divided tongues, as of fire, like the burning bush that revealed God to Moses — a bush that “was blazing, yet it was not consumed”

(Exodus 3:2). The Galilean disciples began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability, making it possible for them to communicate with devout Jews from every nation.

The Holy Spirit was a Universal Charger.

This same Spirit is available to us today, and it is charging us in the same way that it charged the first followers of Jesus. Our challenge is to receive what the Spirit wants to offer us, and then to share that divine energy with others.

First, the Spirit is a creative force in our lives, just as the wind of God was a creative power in the making of the heavens and the earth. In Acts, the Spirit creates the Christian community, which is why Pentecost is sometimes called the “birthday” of the church.

Notice that God’s Spirit is poured out on a collection of believers. “The Holy Spirit is not a ‘personal’ gift from God that each believer privatizes,” says biblical professor Robert Wall. The fact that the Spirit appeared to a group is “the distinguishing mark of a *people* belonging to God.”

We tend to have an individualistic view of faith in the United States, and many people talk about having a personal relationship with Jesus. There is nothing wrong with that, but what is created by the Spirit on Pentecost is a distinctive and powerful *community* faith.

The challenge for us as the Christian community is to be simultaneously both one and many. This means that we are one in our worship of the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But we are many in our expressions of the faith, because we are connected to the Trinity as Christians who are male, female, young, old, middle-aged, gay, straight, conservative, liberal, musical, tone-deaf, native-born, and recent immigrants.

One and many. That may seem like an impossible contradiction, but remember that the Triune God is also both one and many: One God in three persons. In God's own self is a single God who is also a community made up of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We need to remember that the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost to a diverse collection of believers, and this Spirit created something new and powerful: The Christian community.

Next, the Spirit shows us that God is right in front of us, just as the fire of the burning bush told Moses that God was present in his life. On Pentecost, "divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them" (Acts 2:3). This fire was impossible to ignore, and it brilliantly showed that the power of God was with them.

Such fire is nothing new in Holy Scripture. When God liberated his people from captivity in Egypt, the Lord went in front of them "in a pillar of fire" (Exodus 13:21). Then, "the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel" (Exodus 24:17). When the prophets Elijah and Elisha were walking along, "a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven" (2 Kings 2:11).

The Lord "will come in fire," promises the prophet Isaiah, "and his chariots like the whirlwind" (Isaiah 66:15). And in a vision in the book of Revelation, John says that the eyes of Christ will be "like a flame of fire" (Revelation 1:14).

Pillar of fire. Devouring fire. A chariot of fire. A flame of fire. What unites these blazing sights? All are signs of the presence and power of God.

Again, and again, God comes into the middle of human life and appears to us. Sometimes these appearances are brilliant, like tongues of fire on the day of Pentecost. Sometimes they are more subtle, like the squeeze of a hand, an encouraging word, an expression of forgiveness, a statement of love, congratulating our sons and daughters graduating from high school. But whether God comes in blazing fire or in warm words, God is present and powerful.

The promise of Pentecost is that God is with us, always with us, and this is true for all Christians. It echoes the promise made when Jesus was given the name Emmanuel, which means “God is with us” (Matthew 1:23). God is our Universal Charger, giving us the healing and help we need, in every time and place and situation.

Finally, the Holy Spirit gives us the ability to communicate with people of every race and culture, just as it enabled the first followers of Jesus to connect with the diverse Jews of Jerusalem. The apostle Peter quickly discovered that the gift of the Spirit was not a private gift to him. It was given to him so that he could share God’s deeds of power with others.

Taking a bold stand, Peter announced to the people of Jerusalem, “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh” (Acts 2:17). Yes, the Spirit was coming to fill not just Peter and the other followers of Jesus, but a diverse group of sons and daughters, young men, and old men, and even men and women who were slaves. All of the cultural barriers that had previously existed were breaking down, and now, said Peter, “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (v. 21).

The Holy Spirit wants us to break down barriers and share God's energy with others. This may involve learning a new language or teaching English as a Second Language. It may be continuing to support immigrants through the Building Hope in the City ministry. It may challenge us to take a church service out into the parking lot on Christmas Eve, or on to the lawn this summer, to reach people who do not feel comfortable entering a church building. It may require continuing support for our Parma Park ministry to reach students and families who are struggling to make ends meet. At a recent Divinity wedding, one of the bridesmaids who teaches first grade at Parma Park made a point of coming up to me and thanking me for all that our congregation does for Parma Park families in need. That's the Holy Spirit being present through us.

So often, we are content to hold worship services for ourselves and pitch our Bible studies and discussion groups to people who are already in the church. But the book of Acts challenges us to be a Universal Charger, connecting us with people who are unlike ourselves.

The Holy Spirit remains a creative force in the world, one that is continuing to form the Christian community. The flame of God's presence is always with us, working powerfully in our lives. And the Spirit pushes us to reach outward to every race and nationality, sharing divine energy with others.

That's a Hi-Charge Holy Spirit, one that fills us — and others — with the power of God.

May the peace of God . . .

#396 – Spirit of Gentleness