

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro & Dr. David Farwig  
8 June 2025

10:30 a.m. MT  
Pentecost Sunday – Jazz Worship

Calvary Baptist Church  
Denver, Colorado

## ***“The Synergy of the Spirit”***

*NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.*

### ***Acts 2:1-21***

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

Every year on Pentecost we read this electric story about how the Holy Spirit swept through a crowd of disciples and pilgrims from places near and far who were all gathered together in Jerusalem for the festival of Shavuot—which celebrates God giving the Torah to Moses and the people giving to God the “first fruits” of the harvest. You see, it was *already* a day to gather and celebrate gift-giving, yet the most transformative gift of all was yet to come.

When the *pneuma*—which is Greek for “wind, breath, the spirit which animates life”—when the pneuma/Spirit came and filled the entire house where they were gathered, it *sounded* like the blowing of a violent wind; it *looked* like tongues of fire resting on their heads; and it *felt* like mass confusion as the Holy Spirit gave them a dual gift of communication unlike anything they’d ever experienced before.

First, those speaking could all the sudden speak in a language

they did not know, and second, those listening could understand what was being said as if it was spoken in their own native language. This was not a one-way exchange but a multi-directional synergy of expression, orchestrated and animated by the Spirit of God—a Spirit that is always connecting and drawing people together, creating something new.

But it’s no wonder—given the wind, fire, and cacophony of sound—that folks were “amazed and perplexed” asking, “*What does this mean?*” (vs 12)

Good question?! What *does* this mean? What IS the Holy Spirit? As far as I know, the Holy Spirit is not allowing us to speak or understand other languages. I still need subtitles for foreign films and Google translate on my phone when I travel abroad. So then, what *exactly* is the Holy Spirit doing for *us*, and *in us*, today?

By its nature, the Holy Spirit is not easy to define or pin down. Yet we try and understand how the Spirit works because it's the *vital life force* that animates all that we do as a church; it's the breath of the divine that gives us life and it's the fiery wind that pushes us out into our community and beyond.

One of the best metaphors for the Holy Spirit is the improvisational nature of jazz.

So, let's explore the vibrant origins of jazz, a genre that has profoundly shaped the landscape of music and culture worldwide.

Music is a universal language. It speaks to the hearts and minds of all humans in all cultures, even if these expressions of sound vary greatly from different cultures and through history. In our tradition of Western music, there are fundamental principles that create a system of tonal music, meaning it's based on a 12-note scale and, in most cases, without any variations to this basic principle. As we'll see in jazz, however, these 12 notes are played around with – bent and manipulated in ways that stretch the imagination and express a fabulous blending of many

cultures, musical traditions and impulses.

Jazz emerged in the early 20th century in New Orleans, a melting pot of cultures where African, European, and Caribbean influences converged. This bustling city was alive with the sounds of brass bands, blues, ragtime, and spirituals. African American musicians drew upon their rich musical heritage, blending rhythmic complexity with improvisation, creating a new and exciting sound.

And, as Pastor Anne said, jazz improvisation is a great metaphor for the Holy Spirit. It allows musicians to express creativity and spontaneity in real time. As I explain the main tenets of jazz improvisation, Pastor Anne will help us see how they teach us about the Spirit.

First, I'll go over the basics: While improvisation is spontaneous, it usually occurs within a predefined structure and form, just like you'd see in one of our hymns. There are a set number of measures or bars in which a basic tune is outlined. Knowing this basic structure helps musicians

navigate the music while improvising. Without this, music loses its meaning and becomes incoherent and even chaotic. This is the foundation upon which all other musical elements are built.

The same is true in our faith. We need a foundational understanding of WHO God Is before we can understand HOW God Moves in our lives.

Our foundation is Jesus. Jesus is like our sheet music—the notes on the page that tell us about the nature of God in human form. Jesus teaches us how to love and how to live; his life is the outline of our basic form and function as Christians. His life gets us all on the same page and ensures we're all playing in the “same key,” if you will.

But you and I cannot exactly just replicate Jesus' life, we cannot play the notes of his life in rote form as they were written. That's impossible—we live in a totally different time and place! But this is where the Spirit comes in. The Spirit animates us to improvise on the life of Jesus in the unique ways we are gifted to do so.

The Holy Spirit moves in our lives, and the way we know the movement of the Holy Spirit is of God—and not just of our own whimsy and design—is that we have Jesus to always look back to as our foundational music and notation. Is the improvisation of our life still within the structure and notation and key of Jesus' life and teachings?

This is what the disciples lived in real time on Pentecost. Jesus, the man, had left them, but the whole book of Acts is about how the Spirit then moved within them, as they improvised on Jesus' teachings in new ways, in new places, with new people—all with their unique flare, notation, and sound.

Isn't this amazing? Jesus—God *with* us—gave us a foundation so that we could see the divine nature of Love lived out in human form. And then, the Holy Spirit—*God within us*—inspires us to improvise on this song of divine love through *our* own lives in beautiful, unique ways.

So, once we have the foundation and the basic structure of a musical piece, the next key element is the tune or the melody. Melody is a single voice—a single line of sound made up of individual pitches

(like those you might recall from the “Do Re Me” song in *The Sound of Music*); this is the primary statement of a musical piece. For example, in the hymn “Amazing Grace” the basic tune or *melody* is this:

**\*David Sings Example\***

Notice it has a simple rhythm, flow, and length that keeps its structure meaningful. Improvisers will take a melody like this and alter it, creating variations that may include changes in rhythm, pitch, or phrasing. This allows for personal expression while staying connected to the original material.

**\*David Sings Example of Melodic Variation\***

So, let’s think about the mission of Calvary: “*to be a Christ-like community that experiences and shares God’s love*” like the melody line of a song. Each of us, as a different instrument in “jazz combo” of Calvary, sings or play this melody a bit differently. Just as the piano sounds different than the saxophone, how *you* play the melody of “*experiencing and sharing God’s love*” in *your* life will look and sound different than how I play it.

The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, “*There are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, varieties of services but the same Lord, varieties of activities but the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good, to one the gift of wisdom, to another knowledge, to another discernment, to another healing, to another interpretation, another teaching...*” (1 Cor. 12:4-10, 28, para.).

Through the Spirit, each one of us learns to recognize our own unique voice and gifts, so we can sing the melody of God’s love, the melody of Calvary’s mission, through our lives in very specific, particular ways.

And even within our individual gifts, we express them through melodic variations for different contexts or purposes.

For example, maybe your gift is cooking; that’s how you “share God’s love.” One day that gift may look like baking a casserole to take to a family who is grieving (melodic variation #1), the next day it may look like bringing homemade cinnamon rolls to a potluck breakfast here at the church (melodic variation

#2), and the next day it may look like going downtown to serve huge quantities of food to hungry folks in a shelter (melodic variation #3). Same gift of cooking, different expressions or variations.

Another important musical element is the idea of the accompanying musicians taking a supporting role in the one playing or singing the melody. This supporting role is created by other voices or sounds creating harmony that fits the lead melody.

What exactly is harmony? Well, without going too deep, it is a combination of pitches played or sung at the same time creating one sound or *chords*. Chords can vary greatly, and the richness of harmony is like a broad palette of colors in painting. But chords should always support the melody and even enhance it.

This idea of supporting and creating a foundation of harmony and rhythm in an ensemble for a leading voice taking the melody is central to music in general but for improvisation, it's even more critical. Each musician develops their unique style and voice through improvisation. This

personal expression is shaped by influences, experiences, and individual creativity, contributing to the rich tapestry of jazz. Here's an example of a harmonic foundation:

*\*Jazz Combo demonstrates harmony\**

This necessity of musicians taking a supporting role to the one playing or singing the melody is instructive for us as we live as the collective Church, or the Body of Christ. As the Apostle Paul says: *"The body does not consist of one member but of many...God arranged the members in the body, each one of them with their specific purpose supporting one another...The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'"* (1 Cor. 12:14-21, para).

At Calvary, no one member more important than another. We all are needed. We all have a part to play.

Sometimes, a member's gifts might 'take the lead' in sing the melody of the church (our mission), while others support that melody with our harmonies and gifts in the background.

For example, teachers or facilitators of classes might be considered taking the melodic lead in that class, while all the participants lend their voices creating harmony in discussion.

And as seasons change, some melodic leaders step back into more supportive, harmonizing roles, while other, new voices take the lead to sing out the melody in their full voice.

Another way to explore this melody/harmony metaphor on a larger scale is if “experiencing and sharing God’s love” is our *church’s* melody, then the harmonies supporting it are unique to each voice or instrument, or in this case, each church member.

So, someone who brings peanut butter for the Blessings ministry is “sharing God’s love” with a certain pitch or note in the chord—while someone who sings in the choir is helping us “experience God’s love” with a different pitch or note in the chord. Both support the melodic line of our mission—and *together* our gifts blend and our ministries create beautiful harmonic expression as Calvary Baptist Church of Denver so we can sing more powerfully in the world, touching more hearts.

Jazz improvisation also includes a wide range of rhythmic possibilities. Rhythm is the pulse that is maintained throughout a piece, often played by percussion instruments, but it also is always within melody and harmony. For example, in this short phrase of the Doxology tune:

*\*David Sings Example of Doxology in Straight 4/4 Time\**

there is a steady tempo and rhythm or pulse that you feel even as I sing it by myself; without this pulse or rhythm, the tune would become unrecognizable. But with a steady pulse or rhythm a musician can improvise on the melody while still staying meaningfully connected to the original tune.

*\*David Sings Rhythmically Altered Example of Doxology\**

Rhythm in jazz reminds me of rhythms in the church. If our ministries are each marching to the beat of their own drum and aren’t in sync with one another, our “song” will sound chaotic. Listening for the beat of the collective is imperative.

We have certain aspects of our life together that guide us—like the liturgical calendar; we



always celebrate the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost. They give us a rhythm to our life of worship.

We also have rhythms and timings in our other ministries. Calvary has a steady beat of serving those experiencing homelessness, for example, yet we have recently changed up our rhythm a bit in how we do that. Moving from a rhythm of hosting families *inside* of our building through Family Promise, to supporting families *outside* of our building, in the nearby Tamarac Shelter.

We also have rhythms and timings to how we use our individual gifts. Maybe you are in a season of leaning in, full speed ahead, full tempo—able to serve in many ways. Or maybe you need to slow the rhythm and tempo of how you serve right now because of other life realities—caregiving, parenting, health difficulties, travel schedule, school demands. The great thing about a jazz ensemble, is that if an instrument needs to take a breath or break, they can, and the music carries on. The same is true in church. We can rest and then jump back in when we're ready.

This leads us to the *Call and Response* part of jazz. This technique, rooted in African American musical traditions and even their worship, involves a back-and-forth exchange between musicians. One player might "call" with a phrase, and another responds, fostering interaction and dialogue within the performance. Listen to how our combo can do this:

*\*Jazz Combo demonstrates  
Call & Response\**

Call and Response is at the heart of how the Holy Spirit works. When we use our gifts, it's contagious. It's exciting to see that how other folks take what we offer and add to it, expand it, make it their own.

We see on the day of Pentecost, the gift of people speaking in different languages as the Call and others understanding what they are saying in their own language as a Response and this dialectic back and forth leads to 3,000 people being baptized as we learn a few verses later in Acts!

Likewise, here at Calvary, we see Call and Response happening in innovative, impactful ways.

Recently some volunteers in our Blessings ministry—which serves people in need here in our building—have been inspired by the original Call of that ministry to explore a new Response—putting Blessings supplies in our church van and taking that ministry “on the road.” One expression of a ministry leading to another. Call and Response.

I’ve experienced this myself in our “I am Calvary” storytelling series. Last week Jim Comstock mentioned three areas of life as he shared his story— Growing Up, Growing Out, and Growing Old. That framework Called out to me, and now all week I’ve Responded in my own way by using those same terms in other settings to describe phases or stages of ministry. So cool. And this is happening all the time, every day. As we are listening to one another, we are moving and creating in the Spirit.

Which leads to our final, critical elements of jazz music: Listening, Interaction, and Experimentation & Spontaneity.

Successful improvisation relies heavily on the ability to listen and interact with other musicians. This collaborative aspect of jazz allows for a

cohesive performance where musicians build off each other’s ideas. Jazz encourages experimentation and exploration. Musicians are often encouraged to take risks, push boundaries, and explore new ideas, which can lead to innovative sounds and techniques.

Jazz improvisation is characterized by its on-the-spot creativity. Musicians respond to each other and the music in the moment, creating unique performances that can never be replicated exactly.

So, all these key elements combine to create the vibrant and ever-evolving landscape of jazz improvisation, making each performance a unique and exciting experience. And, together, they create a *synergy*, where their combined efforts are greater than the sum of their parts. In this way, music emerges and transcends to a level that can move us deeply.

Let’s listen now as our combo demonstrates this.

*\*Jazz Combo demonstrates a longer improvisational set on doxology\**

Calvary, just as the Spirit swept through at Pentecost, pouring out gifts among the people that



then led to them spreading the love of God in all kinds of new ways and places, the Holy Spirit moves *within* each of us using our unique gifts and it moves *among* all of us together, creating a sweeping synergy that is vibrant and unique to THIS moment in time (June 2025), with THIS particular congregation (all of us who are engaged with Calvary right now), in THIS particular setting (Southeast Denver). As our former pastor Brian Henderson always said, *“There is far more we can do together than any one of us can do on our own.”*

Indeed. The improvisation of the Spirit through Calvary is *unlike any other song* of God’s love in the world. And as we allow the Spirit to move through us, improvising us toward greater inspiration and beauty, may we embrace this agility, experimentation, and playfulness. May we not be afraid to take risks or make mistakes or be bold in our expressions.

Jazz is not afraid of mistakes; in fact, in improvisation, risks or imperfections are not ‘mistakes’ at all—everything becomes part of the unique impact and inspiration of the music. Some things work or sound better than

others, of course, but if one musician takes a risk and it doesn’t quite work, the other musicians sweep in and gracefully incorporate that into a new direction. Part of the synergy is born of struggle. It’s not all about creating music that just simply sounds easy on the ears. It’s about being responsive to what is happening in the moment.

As I mentioned at the beginning, Jazz began in New Orleans. In the late 1800s, the African American community began to develop unique musical forms that expressed both joy and struggle. The blues, with its soulful melodies and heartfelt lyrics, laid the groundwork for jazz, while ragtime introduced syncopation and lively rhythms. Prominent figures like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington would later elevate jazz to new heights, bringing it from the streets of New Orleans to stages around the world.

As jazz spread through the Great Migration, it took root in cities like Chicago and New York, evolving into various styles such as swing, bebop, and cool jazz. Each era of jazz reflects the social and cultural changes of its time, serving as both a voice for the oppressed

and a celebration of creativity and freedom.

Today, jazz—and its close cousin Gospel Jazz—is more than just music; it is a powerful symbol of resilience, innovation, and activism. It continues to inspire countless artists across genres and remains a testament to the spirit of collaboration and improvisation.

We use this same spirit of collaboration and improvisation that started on the day of Pentecost to carry us forward in our justice and movement work today as we seek to co-create the kin-dom of God here on earth. Because it is born of God's love, there is no controlling or predicting what the Holy Spirit can and will do or where it will lead us in the name of expanding and embracing and embodying love.

The gift of the Holy Spirit that marks the birth of the church is first and foremost a gift that is *expressly for those OUTSIDE the Jesus movement*, those who had lived displaced in a language-world not their own.<sup>1</sup> The Holy Spirit's essential nature is that it empowers us to

*move outside of ourselves and connect with others.*

We've been reading stories about the early church in Acts for the past month. Think of ALL the ways the disciples were pushed beyond their comfort zones to invite new people in, challenged to go out to places where they had never been, moved to change their "forever rules of faith" for the sake of welcoming those who were different and new. The Spirit continually provoked them to change their minds and perspectives, and the Spirit continually opened their hearts to embody greater hospitality and inclusion.

And so it is with us. From the movements of the early church to the movements of our day that advocate for ALL people to live as their beloved and created selves in the world (Civil Rights, Women's Rights, Trans Rights)—at the heart of these synergistic movements is divine Spirit-filled love, calling us to create something new together, a kin-dom where we are all *Thriving in Goodness for Good and FOR GOOD.*

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<sup>1</sup> Amy G. Oden, "Commentary on Acts 2:1-21," *Working Preacher* (9 June 2019), accessed on June 8, 2025 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise>

Peter speaks the words of the prophet Joel at Pentecost:

*“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... ” (Acts 2:17)*

So, too, may we celebrate the Spirit that lives within us and moves among us. May it ignite our collective Spirit, Calvary—so that we improvise again and again, creating vibrant, collaborative, inspiring, and transformative expressions of God’s love in the world.

Amen.