

SLD05.15.05 Pentecost
Emory Presbyterian Church
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Acts 2:1-21

“God’s Wild Card”

Pentecost, the celebration of the Spirit, the birthday of the church, and my favorite Sunday of the year. One reason I look so forward to Pentecost is that even in our somewhat reserved, decent and orderly denomination, the Holy Spirit often operates on this days as something of a wild card, and I like surprises. Plus, I like Pentecost because it’s the only day of the liturgical year I get to wear this beautiful red stole of flames given to me by my first parish, Ormewood Park Presbyterian Church. Then, too, for some of us, the Holy Spirit is about as close to the feminine face of God as the Trinity’s gonna get. So this is one of those rare times when I just might get away with slipping in a “She” once in a while when referring to the Holy One. Or not.

But the main reason I’m so drawn to Pentecost is because of the way this celebration of the Holy Spirit so fills me with joy. And hope. For today we celebrate the birthday of the church, including the birthday of this sweet church. But the festivities are not aimed at celebrating us, *our* efforts or accomplishments (after all, besides showing up, what did we have to do with our own births) but at the God who chose to birth the church out of the chaos and despair of those early days after Jesus’ death.

So, Pentecost is a birthday party, and the present God always brings new life. The present *we’re* meant to bring is joy, gratitude, and a certain openness to the possibility of divine wild cards. And like at any party, it’s a day for us ‘frozen chosen’ to melt a tad, wear red in worship, and make the effort to lean just a little past the glorification of God toward the enjoyment of God.

Anybody know where the doctrinal idea of “enjoying “ God comes from? Did I make it up? Oh no, the doctrine of the enjoyment of God comes from an important 17th century entry into our Book of Confessions - the Shorter Catechism – memorized by many a Presbyterian of my parents’ generation as they were growing up. For a nickel. Back when a nickel had buying power.

Anyway, the Shorter Catechism doesn’t just mention the enjoyment of God in passing; it’s asserted up front in the Catechism’s number one question, which is “What is the chief end of man?” And the given answer is, “The chief end of man is to glorify and *enjoy* God forever.”

So never mind most of us Presbyterians are better at glorifying than enjoying God. Pentecost is a day when we’re given a sort of special permission to relax and enjoy whatever wild card might be hidden up the divine, or the worship committee’s, sleeve. Including cake and balloons after worship. Pentecost is a day for celebrating not only the wild cards God’s been dealing since the beginning of time, but the ones yet to be dealt from God’s creative deck.

We begin with today’s reading from Acts, in which God deals some major wild cards to Jesus’ disciples and the crowd around them – wind, fire, confusion, inspiration, insight, puzzlement; tossing on the table some pretty startling sparks that, unbeknownst to the disciples, will soon transform them from a huddle of anxiety to the enduring flames of Christ’s body on earth. But the day doesn’t start out so lively, at least for the disciples.

Here’s how popular preacher Barbara Brown Taylor describes the prelude to that first Pentecost. It takes place during a harvest festival that brings Jews from all over the

civilized world to the temple in Jerusalem. “They have to come,” Taylor says. “It’s one of three obligatory feast days of the year, and so they go: Medes and Elamites from the east; Romans from the west; Libyans from the south; and Cappadocians from the north – all of them streaming into the city and setting up their own camps, so that walking through the crowded city is like taking a trip around the world, with Arabic singing over here, and Libyan laughter over there and, wafting over it all, the smell of Egyptian food cooking over an open fire.

“There’s only one group missing, “ says Taylor, a small band of orphaned disciples who are not walking the streets at all but huddled together behind locked doors for fear of their enemies. For all practical purposes, they and their movement are dead – leaderless, powerless, visionless – the sole survivors of a catastrophe that has robbed them of their future. The world has become a frightening place for them and they have barricaded themselves against it, believing that their own safety lay in sticking together, locking their doors, and keeping everyone else out.”¹ *End Quote.*

It’s miserable scenario, really, radiating all the hopelessness and fear and finality of Jesus’ death until, with a tsunami of sound, the Holy Spirit descends on the dispirited band and torches each head with flickering fire, and they start speaking strange words, words of power, words of hope, words such as they have never spoken before. So quickly come the words from their mouths, the disciples hardly recognize what they’re saying. But the people around them, people from every nation, at least the ones to whom God deals the wild card of revelation, those people understand God’s Word in

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Day of Pentecost,” *The Abingdon Women’s Preaching Annual*, Series 1 – Year B, Compiled and Edited by Jana L. Childers and Lucy A. Rose, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996. p. 117-118.

their native tongues. Though not everybody is dealt in the game. Some witnesses are skeptical and declare, “these babbling men are drunk!”

Well, goofy Peter quickly disabuses them of *that* notion. “Oh no,” says he. “These men are not drunk; why, it’s only...let’s see...11:30 in the morning!” (as if “drunk” is only for later in the day.) “No, these babblers aren’t pickled, they’re prophets! Like Joel. Remember Joel, the prophet? What he said about the last days? How everybody would prophesy, and all who call on the name of the Lord would be saved?” Well, this is it, folks. These are the last days, and these guys are prophesying.

It’s a wild scene – flickering flames, babbling prophets, stunned observers, questioning crowds – this drama of the birth of the Christ’s Church on earth, and as untidy a tale as the birth of any new being. Here on the Temple steps the Spirit is midwife, reaching right up into the womb of Christ’s heart to deliver the messy, mewling newborn of the church onto the wobbly legs of its unsure future. And to the scorn of some but the delight of many, the loquacious infant is exuberant with the irresistible sounds of new life.

On that first Pentecost, when God deals the wild cards of wind and flame, Jesus’ followers are transformed from a clutch of scared, like-minded folks hiding out from a baffling world, to an absurd collection of human candles set on fire to share what they know with the disbelieving and baffled world. And when they open their mouths to say to each other, ‘Hey! Watch out! Your head’s on fire!’” what comes out instead are weird words, strange languages...gibberish to some, glory to others....until the great noise they are making draws a crowd. Travelers from all over the world begin to arrive....

People start leaning through the doors and windows of the hideout to hear themselves addressed in words they can understand.

...Until there's not enough room for all of them in the hideout anymore, which is just as well, because what becomes clear that first Pentecost day is that the church is not supposed to be a hideout anyway. The church is supposed to be an outpost of heaven, a convention of all us fired-up and breathed-on ones sent forth by the Holy Spirit to fill the whole world with God's heat and light."

But the thing is, the disciples can't do that for themselves – get all fired up, I mean. By themselves, the disciples are just dried up husks of too much work and too little vision. But when the Holy Spirit manages to rivet their attention, capture their imagination, enflame their hearts; when the Holy Spirit somehow rounds up the confused, the anxious, the despairing and the weary and infuses them with the warming, healing, flame of God's Word, why then, somehow, Jesus' disciples get so tipsy on the gospel that the whole world starts catching wind.

Hear how 19th century Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, describes God's flaming finger reaching toward us:

Thou mastering me
God! Giver of breath and bread;
World's strand, sway of the sea;
Lord of living and dead;
Thou has bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh,
And after it almost unmade, what with dread,
Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?
Dost thou touch me afresh?
Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.²

² Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Wreck of the *Deutschland*," *All Saints*, Robert Ellsberg, Crossroad Publishing, New York, 1999. p.250.

And so God continues to send the Holy Spirit to soothe us anxious disciples made by God but unmade by fear, to ignite us and fan us and fire us up until we stop thinking so much about what we are or are not doing; and worrying so much about what might or might not happen, and just do what feels right, and let happen whatever God intends. For you see, whenever God plays the wild card of the Holy Spirit, the future of Christ's body gets lifted right out of the hands of disciples and transplanted right firmly in the heart of God.

But how, when, where shall we seek this Spirit who breaks through all our anxiety and efforts and plans to gift us new life?

A while back, a friend of mine (I think it was Cliff) came across these words written in pink chalk on a sidewalk in Decatur:

“Old Spirit, in and beyond me, keep and extend me amid strangers, friends, big trees and great seas breaking. Let me see clear, reach deep. Open me to find due words. Let me hear the whole music. Let love move me. Then give me to the oldest dance. And if it happens, if it happens...glad waking.

But come on, God's word to Emory Church in pink chalk on a sidewalk? Well, could be. After all, it *is* Pentecost.

To the glory of God. Amen.