

**SLD05.20.07 Pentecost**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**  
**Acts 2:1-21**

### **“A Fresh Touch”**

Pentecost, the annual holy day arriving fifty days (give or take) after Easter Sunday, is the day we celebrate the power of the Holy Spirit to birth, out of a bunch of scared, disheartened early disciples, the Church of Jesus Christ. It is also when we celebrate the power of the Holy Spirit to birth, out of a bunch of over-stretched, stressed, and distracted latter day disciples, the heart and mission of Emory Presbyterian Church and Kwanza Fellowship.

For a number of reasons, Pentecost is also my favorite Sunday of the year. For one thing, it's one of the few times I get to wear this beautiful red stole of flames given to me by my very first parish, Ormewood Park Presbyterian Church in East Atlanta, where I was ordained, and introduced to just how hard, and how holy, church work can be.

Another reason I favor Pentecost is that, given that for some of us, the Holy Spirit is about as close to the feminine face of God as our Reformed version of the Trinity's gonna get, I appreciate the opportunity on Pentecost occasionally to slip in a “She” once in a while when referring to the Holy One.

But the more important to me than any of that is Pentecost's assertion that what our church is, and what our church does, and what our church becomes, is not all about me...or you...but rather about a third player in the mix, one who's a whole lot stronger and smarter and clearer about, and more committed to, God's will than you and I can ever hope to be. Pentecost reminds us who's *really* in charge, whom we should *really* be listening to and for, in whose hands the future of the church *really* lies, which is that Guide

and Companion, Advocate and Friend, whom Jesus sends to help us clumsy, self-absorbed seekers stumble on down the path of discipleship – the Holy Spirit.

And so on Pentecost we “frozen chosen” melt a little, wear red in worship and throw a party for the Holy Spirit, thanking her for birthing us as the body of Christ. And as on all birthdays, we make an effort to lean just a hair past our own clenched grip on things toward the enjoyment of God’s possibilities, as we celebrate the power of the Holy Spirit to birth and re-birth the church, and birth and re-birth each of us during our own holy journeys.

The present the Holy Spirit brings to the party is infinite power and potentiality. The presents *we’re* meant to bring are joy, gratitude, and a lively openness to the workings of the Spirit, who’s forever extending possibilities far beyond our own imagination or energy. We’re not here today to celebrate *our* busy efforts or accomplishments (after all, besides showing up, what did we have to do with our own births? Or re-births?) but the renewing power of our redeeming God, who keeps choosing to birth hope out of chaos, embers out of burnout, life out of despair.

And we’ll begin our celebration of the Spirit’s life-giving m.o. with a reading from Acts about that very first Pentecost, when God entertained Jesus’ disciples and the crowd around them with wind, fire, confusion, inspiration, insight, puzzlement and some pretty startling sparks that, unbeknownst to the disciples, would soon transform them from an anxious huddle to enduring flames (scarves) of Christ’s body on earth.

Dramatic reading of Acts 2:1-21. *Now, as we read this account, and during the brief homily following, please raise your scarves when you hear the word fire or flame.*

Now that first Pentecost took place during a harvest festival that brought Jews from all over the civilized world to the Temple in Jerusalem. Remarks Barbara Brown Taylor,

“They have to come. 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 Kenyan food cooking over an open fire.”

But one group is missing from the melee: a small band of orphaned disciples of Jesus Christ are huddled together behind locked doors for fear of their enemies. For all intents and purposes, they and their movement are dead. Without leadership, without power, without vision, the few disciples remaining are “the sole survivors of a catastrophe that 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.”<sup>1</sup>

Until, with a tsunami of sound, the Holy Spirit descends on the dispirited band and torches each head with flickering fire (scarves), and they start speaking strange words, words of power, words of hope, words such as they have never spoken before. And the people around them, people from every nation, at least the ones to whom God deals the wild card of revelation, suddenly understand God’s Word to them in their native tongues! But not everybody is given the gift of interpretation of tongues. Skeptics declare, “these babbling men are drunk!”

Of which notion goofy Peter quickly disabuses them - “Oh no,” he says. “These fellows aren’t drunk yet. Why, it’s only...let’s see...11:30 in the morning!” (As if to say, you wanna see drunk, check these guys out after the official cocktail hour.)

“No,” says Peter. “These babblers aren’t pickled, they’re prophets! Like Joel. Remember Joel and what he said?... about the last days? How everybody would prophesy, and those who called on the name of the Lord would be saved? Well, this is it, folks. We’re looking at the last days, in God’s time, anyway, and these fellows are prophesying.”

It’s a wild scene sketched for us – this drama of the birth of the Christ’s Church on earth – and kind of funny in retrospect: flickering flames (scarves), babbling prophets, stunned observers, questioning crowds...as untidy a tale as the birth of any new being. But 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 upon its arrival, to the scorn of some but the delight of many, that slippery, squalling, loquacious infant is exuberant with irresistible sounds of new life.

And in its presence, what do you know but that 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 (scarves) to share 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 (scarves)!” 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. People start leaning out the doors and windows to hear themselves addressed in words they understand. And the crowd grows until there’s not enough room for all of them to hide out 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. What the church is supposed is to be an outpost of heaven, a convention of all us fired-up (scarves),

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Day of Pentecost,” The Abingdon Women’s Preaching Annual, Series 1 – Year

breathed-on ones sent forth by the Holy Spirit to fill the whole world with God's heat and light.

Thing is, what I keep noticing is how we disciples have a hard time staying fired up (scarves). We can't seem to do that for ourselves. Truth is, mostly we feel pretty stupid waving (scarves) in worship. An awful lot of the time, on our own, we keep coming off as dried up husks of humanity laboring under way too much work with way too little vision.

But what do you know but that once in a while the Holy Spirit manages to grab our attention and fire (scarf) us back up. Every great once in a while the Holy Spirit somehow manages to sneak in our everyday lives, capture our imagination and enflame our hearts (scarves). Every so often, our "mastering us God," as Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it, our mastering us God figures out a way to "touch us afresh,"<sup>2</sup> to infuse us confused, anxious, despairing and world-weary folks with the warming, healing, flame (scarf) of the Holy Spirit. And when that happens, when once again we "feel God's finger and so find God" why then some of us'll get so tipsy on the Spirit that folks might just think we're drunk with gospel foolishness.

And just how does the Holy Spirit keep finding us anxious, "made by God but unmade by fear" disciples and fanning the flame (scarf) of God's truth in us?

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B, Compiled and Edited by Jana L. Childers and Lucy A. Rose, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996. p. 117-118.

<sup>2</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Wreck of the *Deutschland*,"

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.

Easier to say, I think, how She does not, for that list would be much, much shorter. As I see it, there are few means indeed that the Holy Spirit does NOT use to penetrate our hearts, minds, and senses with lively reminders of her life-giving power – scripture, creation, relationship; children, adolescents, old people; stories, insights, ideas; art, nature, beauty in all its forms; heartache, heartbreak, grief, forgiveness; holding hands, making music, making love; a walk with a friend, an evening breeze, spitting watermelon seeds; a glance, a flame (scarf), a laugh; an ice cold Coke on a sunny afternoon – tell me what the Holy Spirit *hasn't* used to grab our attention and fire us up with a lively sense of God's power and possibilities?

And when our attention *is* grabbed and fired (scarves) and fanned, that's when the Holy Spirit powers up us ordinary, everyday, over-worked, and underfed (in any spiritual, if not physical, sense) people 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 take the next step that feels right and pleasing to both our gut and our God, and then let happen whatever God intends.

Which is precisely the moment at which Christ's body, the church, you and I, get lifted right up out of the challenges of our lives and the busyness of the church, and re-birthed, silly scarves and all, firmly in the heart of God, which is precisely where Jesus' scared, disheartened, over-stretched, and distracted disciples have always belonged.

To the glory of God. Amen.