

A PRESBYTERIAN PENTECOST PARTY

Acts 2:1-21; Pentecost Sunday, a
June 12, 2011
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Prayer

Spirit of Truth, breathe upon us this Pentecost day and always. May your Spirit break into the rooms we shut ourselves up inside and startle us so that with the help of your Spirit, this scripture might be alive and present to us today. Amen.

Acts 2:1-21

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. **2** And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. **3** Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. **5** Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. **6** And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. **7** Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? **8** And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? **9** Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, **10** Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, **11** Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." **12** All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" **13** But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." **14** But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. **15** Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. **16** No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: **17** "In the last days it will be, God declares, that 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. **18** Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. **19** And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. **20** The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. **21** Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

After coming up with a sermon title early in the week and living with it for a few days, I began to wonder if “A Presbyterian Pentecost Party” is actually an oxymoron. You know what an oxymoron is, don’t you? Here is a definition from a dictionary: “a rhetorical figure in which an epigrammatic effect is created by a paradoxical conjunction of terms.” Sounds clear to me.

In other words, an oxymoron is a group of words which contradict themselves: jumbo shrimp, cruel kindness, congressional ethics ... Presbyterian Pentecost Party?

There is a scene in one of the motion picture classics of all time which illustrates this. In the “Muppet Movie” (I found that ever since we had children, the idea of what a classic is began to change!), Kermit and Miss Piggy and the crew are on their way across the country in hopes of achieving stardom in Hollywood. They are traveling along the road and come up to a quaint, idyllic looking church. As soon as they open the door, however, the peaceful nature is shattered by a rock group composed of the strangest, most sordid looking Muppets this side of the Cookie Monster. The incomprehensibility of their looks is topped only by their music, played with enthusiastic, reckless abandon.

Then Kermit utters a line which has been destined to go down in cinematic history, if not Reformed history. He looks at them and turns to his friends and says “That’s funny. They don’t look Presbyterian!”

Like a rock band, flames, shouting, wind, dancing, all seem so...un-Presbyterian. We Presbyterians have been accused of many things in our worship, but never has anyone looked at us worshipping and said “They must be drunk!”

A Presbyterian Pentecost Party? Is it possible for God’s frozen chosen to be warmed by the fires of the Spirit?

Part of our problem is that we take, or say we take, critical study of the Bible very seriously. And when we take a look at what happened that first Pentecost, we rational folks don’t know what to make of it. People gathered from all around, there was the sound of the mighty wind, people began speaking in different languages, but everyone heard people speaking in their own language. Tongues of fire alighted on everyone’s head, and they looked at each other and said “Hey, there’s a fire on your head!” That’s an alien experience to most of us. Our enlightened scientific minds know that things like that just don’t happen. And so we’re better off, and certainly more secure by keeping things unchanged, safe, and cool; reserved. I’ll say it: decently and in order.

But Acts was not written by a scientific historian. Luke was a theologian and an artist who was looking at events through the eyes of a local church historian. The Spirit had appeared before these people, but Luke knew that whenever we begin to describe encounters with God, our language inevitably falls short.

We have that problem, don't we? We come to an ordinary worship service on an ordinary day, but something happens every now and then and we leave changed. But when we try to describe it to others, words fail us. The facts alone don't do it. We're stuck with "you had to be there." Or "it was one of those liminal moments when heaven and earth became very close." Or simply "the Spirit was there."

And so how can Luke get across to his readers the importance of the way the Spirit of God appeared in that Jerusalem congregation? He doesn't just recite the facts, but instead he turns up the color knob on the set until the screen glows with exaggerated oranges and reds, not because any experience of the Spirit needs exaggeration, but because language is finite, limited, and needs to be stretched out of its usual shape in order to witness to the true power and meaning of such rare experiences with the Spirit of God.

And so Luke, for example, lets us know, *ad nauseum*, who all was gathered there that day. Why not just say "People were gathered from east and west and north and south?" That was good enough for Jesus in Luke's own gospel! But that didn't go far enough. This conglomeration of people is not only a diverse and pluralistic gathering of tourists, but it is an historically impossible collection of folks, except in the sort of exaggerated narrative Luke's theology evokes.

Consider the Medes, for example. They must have had a rather difficult journey to Jerusalem since they would not only have had to travel several hundred miles, but several hundred years as well, the Medes having already disappeared from the canvas of history. The same is true of the Elamites, who seemed to have wandered over to this Pentecost story not from the Tigris River, where they once lived, but rather from the annals of history in the pages of the Old Testament!¹

This convocation of nations represents not only east and west and north and south for Luke, but the ancient and the contemporary, the living and the dead, the new and re-constituted Israel. The church is now formed, but it is not formed in a vacuum. Rather, they were standing on the shoulders of the old Israel, just as you and I are standing on the shoulders of the saints in the church triumphant, our forebears, who continue to make up a part of this church.

And then there's the language. Oh my, there are so many questions we want to ask. Does Luke mean that the believers got divided up into language groups—some of the speakers speaking this language and others speaking that language; or did they all speak one ecstatic tongue that was somehow heard and translated by each hearer?

And, come to think of it, how did the hearers know that the speakers were all Galileans? Don't worry about it, Luke would say. There's only one thing that's important here ... God is to be praised in every dialect, extending the gospel of God's gracious presence in Jesus Christ into every human arena, obliterating the word "foreigner" from its vocabulary. There is no such thing as a foreign Christian (something our youth group is realizing at this very moment in El Salvador).

You see what Luke was trying to do? He was showing what happens when the Spirit of God takes hold of a group of people ... only he wasn't writing as an engineer; he was writing as an artist.

What happens when the Spirit of God moves? The living and the dead become one church. What happens when people encounter the Spirit of God? They begin to understand one another.

What happens when Pentecost occurs? People move from fear and numbness ... to boldness and courage. It was Peter that stood up and boldly interpreted what was happening here; the same Peter who, when we last saw him, was cowering in the shadows of the night, denying that he knew Jesus.

What happens? In short, there is new life and growth and enthusiasm! Kind of like what we are experiencing here at Idlewild. I heard from someone recently who travels around our denomination a lot, and he said that he would be hard-pressed to name an urban church in the PC(USA) that is as vibrant and alive and healthy as Idlewild. I concurred. But like that first Pentecost, all of this has not happened in a vacuum. We are standing on the shoulders of members who allowed the Holy Spirit to move into their lives and the life of this congregation.

Some of you remember the ministry of T.K. Young. Some remember his long prayers. He married some of you, including Mary Catherine Grymes and Julia Wellford Allen, who wanted to be married on the same day in April! He believed passionately in Jesus' prayer that we all might be one, and worked in the 1940s and early 50s to bring about reunion between the northern and southern Presbyterian churches. He led the movement in the south, much to the dismay and anger of other churches and pastors here in Memphis. But he could not have done it without a congregation that shared his vision, that knew that Yankees had something to offer to us southerners (and we had something to offer to them!) And what started here at Idlewild spread and spread until in 1984 the churches reunited and became one.

Some of you have recalled the role Paul Tutor Jones and John Johnson played during the unrest of the civil rights movement and the assassination of Dr. King. One of you recounted how you always sat with a friend in the balcony drawing pictures while your family worshipped down below. Every Sunday your father would test you and ask "So what was Dr. Jones' sermon about?" "Love and goodness," you would always say. Couldn't go wrong with that answer.

Those were difficult days, but the pastors could not have done what they did without a congregation that was open to what the Spirit was doing in their midst. There were other pastors who spoke out throughout the south about the evil of racism, (not enough!) and many of them lost their jobs. But it was you who honored the freedom of the pulpit, you who offered Dr. Jones and Dr. Johnson your support, and you who rather than succumb to the fear that was so prevalent in culture and church, faced the future with courage. You who did not flee to other churches because they supported the status quo. It didn't feel like it back then, but looking back on it (like Luke did) one can only surmise that a Presbyterian Pentecost was taking place.

Part of Henry Strock's legacy is that he brought in the first woman in our presbytery to be ordained as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament (or as a "teaching elder" as we were called back then!), Louise Upchurch, now Louise Johnson. But that's only partly true. Ministers are called by the vote of the congregation. You were the ones who called Louise. You were the ones

who took grief from some of your friends at other Presbyterian churches about “going against the Bible!” You were the ones who opened your hearts to something new the Holy Spirit was doing in our midst. It was a Presbyterian Pentecost moment.

A number of you remember Jim Lowry, who shortly after he arrived realized the needs of the city were changing; the numbers of the homeless were increasing. And so even though you had just been through a major capital funds drive, he led a new campaign that was focused simply on outreach. Drive down Peabody and take a look at Idlewild Court, the first transitional apartments in the city. And even today we are able to help “the least of these” through those funds. But Jim would be the first to say he wasn’t the one who did the hard work. You did. You sacrificed because you knew that we were called to stay here in mid-town and not move out east because this is where God was calling us to be. You were the ones who understood that. I call that the work of the Holy Spirit!

Now, for those of you who are newer to the church, and for those who are visiting, I want you to know that we don’t stroll down memory lane very often. We certainly don’t romanticize the past (those weren’t always “the good ol’ days”), nor do we worship those who have led the way. But it is important for you to know something of the foundation we have here. We look back with a deep sense of gratitude to these faithful folk who were always able to see more to the church than meets the naked eye.

And that somehow through it all the Spirit was able to take all of our committee meetings, all of our feeble efforts at justice and peace, all of our bumbling attempts to comfort the sick, all of our scrambling around to have meaningful worship, all of our inarticulate ways of sharing good news; all of our human attempts at being the church ... the spirit is able to take all of that ... and set it on fire.

And though I don’t know what the future holds, it’s my guess that this church will continue to have members that will dream dreams and see visions; will have the gift to see with childlike wonder; to see things in a different way than most people; to see life on a deeper level, to know the presence of the Risen Christ everywhere, and to have the courage to use their gifts to help others catch the vision of a new world!

So you are invited to the party, but not just any old party. Come to the Presbyterian Pentecost Party, for it will be a celebration that even the Muppets would find extravagant!

Amen.

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¹Tom Long, *Journal for Preachers*, “A Night at the Burlesque: Wanderings Through the Pentecost Narrative,” Pentecost, 1991, p. 28.