

A Vicarage Tea-party Gone Wild

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, June 12, 2011, The Day of Pentecost: Whitsunday.
Based on Acts 2:1-21.*

And who wouldn't be—amazed and perplexed? At one of the great pilgrimage events in the city of Jerusalem, strange things had occurred. Luke, the writer of Acts, uses fantastic imagery to talk about the power that had come upon the disciples: a sound like the rush of a violent wind and a spirit that appeared as tongues of fire. And, as the story goes, empowered by the spirit that had mysteriously and magnificently come to rest upon them, they began to speak in other languages.

What does this mean? What indeed?

Because of the way I interpret and understand scripture, my inclination is to spend a couple of minutes presenting another way of hearing this story, a way that does not require any literal understanding of it. Of course, I believe that Luke used metaphorical and dramatic language to describe the moment; but to emphasize that too much, as the Australian scholar William Loader suggests, may cause us to miss the fact that something happened, something wonderful happened. We are all smart people. So let's just agree to hear the details of the story in whatever way we can and to focus our thoughts on the infinitely more important question of what it means to have the spirit of God come upon us, maybe even to imagine what it might feel like to be empowered like that ourselves.

It is not possible to know precisely what happened on this first Christian Pentecost, the day which we sometimes call the birthday of the church; but I have no trouble believing that it was an extraordinary event. The festival itself, of course, was quite ordinary; it was an ancient annual observance that was deeply engrained in the lives and practice of all devout Jews. These new Christians, just now—if even then—coming to understand themselves in that way as Christians, were unmistakably Jewish to the core. Of course, they were gathered for this revered festival of the faith of their birth. They wouldn't have missed it for the world.

Still stunned by recent events, my guess is that they were particularly looking forward to the holy days—seeking their footing, some grounding, some way of understanding the life and death of Jesus. For them to gather at a festival that remembered dramatic acts of their God and NOT to understand that action as instructive in their new lives of faith in Jesus would have been extraordinary. They were primed for the spirit to move anew among them, and they were not disappointed.

The spirit of God rushed into their lives like a brisk wind, taking a group of fearful people who had seen their world crumble in recent days and empowering them in such a way that the telling of their story became so passionate that it changed the entire world. Little wonder it felt like rushing wind and tongues of fire to them. They became people who were almost fearless, arguably foolishly fearless; and nothing would hold them back. We never again hear of their being huddled in small rooms.

If we read a bit further in the Acts of the Apostles, we learn that the crowd, witnessing the joy and exuberance of these Christians, assumed that they were drunk. Incidentally, very few people observing our worship ever conclude that we are drunk. Generally, I suppose that is good news; however, the conservative English New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright, with whom I disagree on just about everything, in speaking about why some modern folks are attracted to Pentecostalism (which,

though different from what happened on Pentecost, is similar in its emphasis upon the moving of the spirit) once made an insightful and important observation. He said “If you’ve been in a desert for a long time and are now very hot and thirsty, and then a fountain of water suddenly springs up in front of you, you’re not going to stand calmly by and pour yourself a small glassful and sip it as though you were at a vicarage tea-party. You’re going to shout for joy and wallow in it and let it splash all over you while you laugh and play and drink until you can drink no more.” On this I believe the good Dr. Wright was absolutely correct.

Flash forward a couple of thousand years, and we find that here at St. Bart’s we are about halfway through a year of significant transition. After 17 years Bill Tully is leaving, and it is my great privilege to succeed him. That is a big deal because the top leadership in the parish is changing. But let me tell you what is a bigger deal. It is a bigger deal that we use this natural time of reflection and rethinking about what is truest and best about us, to claim anew that the same power that these disciples experienced on the first Pentecost belongs to us. We are they; we are they who must continually decide how we shall live as people who have experienced the spirit of God. A change in leadership is a time of re-upping, a time of stopping and imagining and evaluating how we live as people whose lives are filled with the spirit of God.

Let me be clear: it is not my intention that we become like those who shout with joy or roll around in the spirit. In fact, I rarely shout and can’t remember when I last rolled—or rocked and rolled, for that matter. But with all my heart I believe that we are at a pivotal point in the life of this great old place. Active church involvement, in case you don’t know, is on the decline in the U.S. I have friends who are priests—none here, a fact for which I am privately grateful—who believe that in our lifetime (and I am talking about mine) we shall see the church in the U.S. mirror the church in England. The church, they argue, will retain its historical importance, remaining the venue for various events, weddings and funerals; but beyond that largely ceremonial function, it will cease to be a transformative force in the society.

For the record, I emphatically do not believe that—not for a moment—and I don’t want you to. Of course, God moves in ways other than the church; and if the church went away tomorrow, God would not; God would remain. But I believe that the Spirit of God is not finished with this great, noble, and clearly flawed, concept—the church—and further that God is not finished with our little corner of it, here at 51st and Park Avenue. It is an amazing responsibility and privilege to keep moving toward our next iteration. I readily admit to not knowing exactly what the next stage of St. Bart’s life will look like and acknowledge that we must be open to the Spirit’s moving us into new directions, a fact that is more exciting than frightening for me. But above all, it is really important to me on this Feast of Pentecost that every one of us in this room remembers that we are visited with the same Spirit and with the same message of God’s good news that empowered the disciples so many centuries ago.

As long as there are poor to be cared for, as long as there are babies (and adults) to be baptized and told the stories of the faith, as long as there are oppressed people around the world whose voices can be heard only when blended with ours, as long as there are people—like you and me—who desperately need to be in community with one another, the need for Pentecost remains. And the spirit of God has come, is coming now, and shall always come to show us how to be the church. My prayer is that we shall know the fearlessness of Pentecost in believing that the sky is the limit.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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