

# Love on Fire

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Priest-in-Charge,  
at the eleven o'clock service, May 27, 2012.*

*The Day of Pentecost: Whitsunday.*

*Based on John 7:37-39a.*

I used to find Pentecost just a bit embarrassing, to tell the truth. Billed as the birthday of the Church, nothing about it sounds like my church. It was a day of chaos, or so it seemed to me as I would hear this story from the book of Acts each year: violently rushing wind that was thunderously loud; tongues of flame that whipped about, one tongue landing on each person; and the sudden ability to speak in other languages. Despite the appeal of instant and flawless French, I think I would probably have passed. Just not exactly my idea of a morning of beautiful Sunday worship.

As I do about many pieces of scripture, I fairly quickly—and would still argue, correctly—relegated this story to the category of literary hyperbole, an accommodation on my part which happily allowed me to safely and without any sign of being singled return to my orderly prayers and the familiar strands of William Byrd. And once again all was right with my world: no foul, no harm, all comfortable and predictable on the church front, leaving good enough alone. Come to think of it, I wonder if that is the “real” orthodoxy—leaving good enough alone.

But something this year jiggled loose in my carefully constructed understanding of Pentecost. Maybe it is simply a function of my age: many things now seem to jiggle loose. Actually I think it is more than that. Out of the blue—I heard no rushing wind and felt no flames—but clearly out of the blue, it began to occur to me in a new way that something extraordinary really did happen on Pentecost. Oh, probably not on *one* day of Pentecost, and, as I have already claimed, probably not with all the supernatural drama applied by a good storyteller. But, by God, something happened: a group, hardly worthy of even being called such, scattered and scared and often sort of clueless, a small band of people whose lives had been dramatically transformed by knowing or knowing of Jesus, came together with great power and proceeded to change the world—and not just their little part of the world but a huge portion in a nearly unbelievable way.

As I have pondered it this week, strangely with new interest and a more open heart, I have come to believe that in fact a new language did develop. The ancient festival of Pentecost, coming seven weeks after Passover, recalled the receiving of the Law from Mt. Sinai and the arrival of the harvest. Cherished by the Jews in Jerusalem and around the world, a day when relatives from far and wide were at the end of a long stay in Jerusalem (most of them having been there for fifty days), Pentecost was the natural setting for the narrator of the early Christian movement to use as the venue for the inrushing of a new language. A new language, a language that was as little known as it is often now and yet a language that is easily and universally translated into every open heart and even into some that are nailed shut, a new language arrived: it was the language of love. I want to be clear that I am not saying that love did not exist prior to Pentecost; of course it did. Where God exists, love inevitably is found. But something about the way Jesus lived and loved, probably in ways beyond which even he understood, brought a new language of loving, a new breath, a new openness; and in the eyes of many people it had begun to take hold.

Long before the church people began to codify it in efforts to control it, it was whispered about—breathlessly I suspect: “Did he really love that adulterous woman without wanting to take advantage of her; did he mean that story claiming that the truly good man was the Samaritan; could he in fact want us to sit at table with tax collectors or to take water from an unclean woman of another clan?”

Outrageous. So outrageous that it got Jesus killed. By the time the Acts story occurred, some few were beginning to say, “Maybe he really did mean all this stuff.” As time passed, some, like Paul, got it better than others, like Peter. The authentic Paul, not the Paul of the later epistles like Ephesians, but the Paul of Galatians, really, really got it. I believe that by the time of this Pentecost, which is to say by the time this band of followers got their groove, they were speaking a new language indeed. Because it was real life, it was never without problems. The conservatives like Peter for a long time wanted the Gentiles to have to become Jews before they could become Christians; the liberals like Paul—yes the authentic Paul was radical in his welcome—said, “Come, know Jesus as you are; you don’t have to change the way you eat or the markings on your body; come, love, follow.”

On the day of Pentecost, where and whenever something like this day may have occurred, love was flowing so freely it was clear to all that a new beginning had been rushed into the world, their little part of it anyway. People of all languages could understand what they saw and heard, and they were astonished. Many said “yes” to this powerful movement at that very moment. But as evidence that even joy beyond imagining can be rejected, what did the religious establishment say? It said, “These people are not filled with the spirit; they are drunk! Look at them, carrying on like crazy people. Nobody can be that happy unless they are drinking.” Sad, isn’t it? Very, very sad.

We know how the story unfolded. Even many Christians became fearful of the new language; it was too new, they said, too radical, too inclusive. And sadly, by and large, the church as it became an institution, much more like me in my love of order than like these wild Pentecost Christians who were so happy they seemed drunk, has exercised great caution, usually not out of evil but mostly out of fear—fear that the Good News of Jesus really was/is too good to be true.

The reason Pentecost can have so much power for us this year (and any year) is that we still stand in need of letting that rushing wind blow upon us! It is not going to knock us over or set us on fire—except maybe and hopefully metaphorically; but it will for sure *literally* give us a new language of love. The reason these wonderful scriptures, so distant from historical reporting, so filled with agenda and on occasion outright prejudice, the reason they inspire us even unto this day is that they were written for and by people just like us—people still in the process of being redeemed!

St. Bart’s is still in the process of being redeemed! We’ve done some great things, but there are greater days to come; our doors have been opened, but they can and must be opened wider yet; we have cared for this wonderful old holy building, but we can and must love and preserve it even more fully; we have fed, clothed and given shelter, but we can and must do more than we are doing.

Whatever that spirit was, it still is. And it is the spirit that gives us more joy than we can imagine, can even make us seem intoxicated with love; it is the spirit that can allow us to live in joy even when we are far from joyful; it is the spirit that walks and breathes for us when we can’t take another step. It is Pentecost, my brothers and sisters: Pentecost has come again.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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