

History and Now: A Pentecost Reflection
Rev. Bill Crawford and Rev. Julie Emery
Pentecost Sunday, with the Confirmation of New Members
May 21, 2010

Acts of the Apostles 1.6-8

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Acts of the Apostles 2.1-13

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

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History - Rev. Dr. Bill Crawford

On the day of Pentecost they came from all over. They came on that day because it was familiar as a religious holiday – Shavuot – 50 days after Passover. Following the resurrection, Jesus had said he would come to them, sending a Spirit. There was anticipation and anxiety. All of these different folks from all over the place. They came with feelings that were all over the map as well . . . with fears for the future, concerns for loved ones and those suffering loss, questions about . . . and they came because their lives had been touched by Jesus, his goodness and grace. They were followers, believers in him.

Luke tells us that there were the original disciples, with Mattias soon to take the place of Judas, and many more: 120, a growing number.

The miracle of this event is that it drew people from all parts of the known world – Egypt, Galilee, Capadocia, Asia – of them speaking different languages. They were abundant and abounding in differences. And, yet, while each person spoke in their own native tongue, they understood each other. They were caught up in the Spirit together.

Without plan, without warning, like the fluttering of the wings of a dove, that Spirit settled upon them, and they began to speak in profound ways. With the gentleness of a summer breeze, they were drawn together. With the force of a rushing wind, the walls that divided them came crashing down. With the power of God's deeds, the power of each one's [common] humanity, common goodness was revealed and made known. The Spirit filled the place. It filled their hearts . . . this Spirit we share.

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History - Rev. Julie Emery

We as Christians in the 21st century aren't swept up so much by the Spirit. We tend to be more calculated, more intellectual about our faith. Confirmation classes often spend time discussing what they believe more than how they live out those beliefs. Having inherited this history and story of Pentecost we tend to want to debate it just as those who thought those early disciples were "drunk on wine": is this how it really happened? What was actually going on? Instead of respond to it: what does it really matter? What does this mean for me?

In the history of church, and on that first Pentecost day, it surely mattered for different reasons. For some it mattered because of the community, the friendship and fellowship shared – the united message spoken in a multiplicity of languages. For some it mattered because there was a truth that was spoken about justice and reconciliation and God's love and vision for the world. For some it was about acting out that truth in service, welcoming the alien, caring for the victim, loving the enemy.

And yet whatever the reason why they came together – the Spirit brought them together, just as it does today; Bringing together people of great differences and diversity. In our Confirmation class, even, people from three different high schools – across Mamaroneck and New Rochelle. People with wonderfully different interests: from theatre to music, to boy scouts to marine biology to lacrosse, even people with backgrounds that draw from various countries around the world, even people whose family lives and stories with the church are as varied as their personalities. The spirit has been and is at work, uniting in laughter, inspiring towards service, sharing experiences and connecting with one another.

The early Christians at Pentecost didn't seem so much concerned with "right belief." They didn't spend the day arguing about doctrine – about what they believed about the Trinity or the divine make up of Jesus. That came much later. The beginning of the church was more about – a feeling. An experience of divine presence that could not be denied. An experience of hope and faith that was still a quiet seedling, waiting to be nurtured and grown.

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Acts 2:14-21

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:

*'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.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'*

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Now - Rev. Julie Emery

Perhaps you have felt that too: the divine presence in the midst of community. Maybe it came like a rushing wind. Maybe it was more an inkling, a feeling that these are the kinds of people you'd like to spend more time with. Maybe it was an intellectual discussion that brought you here – or maybe it was a friend with a welcoming smile. Whatever the reason you started – now you stand alongside others throughout time walking together on a journey.

Dr. Martin Luther King once said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." Confirmation is less about figuring out just what you believe as it is about choosing to be open to the Spirit as it moves through this world and community. It is less about being sure and more about taking risks. It is less about certainty and more about faith – the kind of faith that steps even when you don't know what is coming next. Because even after this day when the Spirit moved and claimed these gathered around, there were still doubts. There were still questions about the next steps. There were still confusions and struggles and wonderings. But in the presence of one another and in the fullness of the spirit, they lived through those questions with one another.

So if you still have doubts: you are in good company. If you are still unsure: you are not alone. If you sometimes don't feel or see that Spirit: you are in the right place. Today you join with generations before and this great community gathered here seeking to live out those questions together.

And so may it be for you eight gathered here and for all of us – continuing in the tradition of the early church. Finding ourselves coming together in our doubts and beliefs, despite differences. Coming together because of a common Spirit present in the church, the community gathered here at LAC and beyond throughout the world, coming together taking the first step and dreaming of where it might lead.

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Now - Rev. Dr. Bill Crawford

And so, the church came into being on that day of Pentecost. The disciples who had been following Jesus stayed in Jerusalem and awaited “the promise” – that’s the word he uses -- “the promise,” of God’s presence with them. The twelve had grown to a number of seventy followers. By the end of the gathering that day in the upper room – on the day of Pentecost -- the number had grown to 3000!

Imagine, so many people clamoring to be a part of congregation! Imagine, droves of people outside our doors right now, pushing their way to come in, stirred by the Spirit, coming to be a part of the family! In these moments the church is being born.

That’s the Pentecost story. In that spirit, this day we welcome 9 new members – just as it was that day, when – as Peter in his sermon – lifted up the words of the prophet Joel: saying that those older shall dream dreams and those young shall see visions . . .

To dream and to envision a church with a vision and purpose: Who we are as God’s people, realizing what God is calling us to do and be . . . we are a community of Christ of all ages, welcoming and gathering in love, growing by grace, going forth to serve . . .

The vision is realized in this very place, on this very day... in the music we sing, the prayers we pray. The vision is realized in our coming together from different corners of our world, from different perspectives on life – joining our voices, joining in harmony... in community. Welcoming one another; reaching out to one another.

The vision is realized in this place and on this day... as we welcome new members to the church: Sarah and Kimberly, Alex and Russell, Julianna and Carina, Zach and Scott.

The vision is realized, and the vision spreads and grows this day and each day when we welcome not these 8, but when we welcome each one... each one here... each one anywhere. When we recognize a world in which no wall, no barrier, no divide or distinction nothing... when we recognize there is nothing in all of creation that can separate us from the love of God we know in Jesus Christ. On this day, God’s love is realized. God’s community is realized. Dream is realized. This is our Pentecost, behold the Spirit alive in us.