

“On Fire”

Sunday, May 11, 2008—Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21

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Happy birthday, church. Today is Pentecost Sunday, the day on which the first Christian church came to be. And this morning you heard how it happened. Jesus’ followers have locked themselves up in a dark room, a sad, dispirited and fearful bunch. Jesus is gone and they figure they will commiserate with each other for a while before they give up once and for all, and go back to the lives they were leading before he came along.

But then some astonishing things start to happen. A violent wind tears through the place, shaking everything to the rafters. Flames appear and rest on Jesus’ followers. They rush out on to the streets of Jerusalem, where thousands are gathering for the Jewish agricultural festival of Shavuot. People have come from near and far, from all kinds of exotic places with hard to pronounce names: Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia. All of them begin to speak in different languages, but the strange part is, everyone understands each other as though their own language is being spoken. They know something really important is happening, but they are confused about exactly what it is and what it all means. Some sneer and chalk it all up to excessive alcohol consumption too early in the day, but Luke tells us that what happened was, the Spirit of God had come upon them all.

Next thing you know, that scared little bunch was transformed. They couldn’t stop talking about God. They had a message for the world about God entering human history in Jesus Christ, and they went out to live the message with energy and enthusiasm and to share it with a passion that proved irresistible.

One of those whose life was transformed that day was Peter, the disciple who, when the going got rough, denied knowing Jesus, not once but three times. Peter goes out to preach the gospel, gets right up close and personal with a many of the same people who frightened him into a quivering mass of jelly only a few weeks previously. Peter preaches a memorable sermon that leads to 3000 new believers being baptized. You heard part of his sermon this morning. One of the things he says is that the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost was predicted centuries earlier by the Hebrew Bible prophet Joel. Joel said a time would come when God would pour out God’s spirit upon all people. In Joel’s day, people understood that God revealed Godself to only a few people, the prophets, who were then empowered to speak God’s message to others on God’s behalf. Joel said all that would change. The day would come when everyone, young and old, slaves and free, men and women, everyone would be empowered by the Spirit to speak to the world on God’s behalf.

Did you hear that? Everyone. That’s one of the main points of the book of Acts. God’s plan for the church was never to have a separate class of people who wear robes and collars on Sunday to set them apart from everyone else. God’s plan for the church was never to make a seminary degree a prerequisite for proclaiming God’s word. God’s plan for the church was never to give so-called experts a monopoly on talking about God.

From the very beginning, God's plan for the church has been that the Spirit would be poured out on us all, that every single one of us would receive the Spirit's power so we could tell the story of God's great love for the world, poured out in Jesus Christ.

But in today's world, it's become hard for us to speak about God. After decades of dominating American culture, in the twenty-first century, Christianity has definitely moved to the sidelines. As our country has become more culturally and religiously diverse, Christianity has declined in influence. It's no longer assumed that everyone is a Christian; it's no longer assumed that everyone goes to church on Sunday. To identify ourselves as Christians today is to invite a response of raised eyebrows or rolled eyes. There is a growing tendency to regard being Christian as synonymous with being narrow minded, closed to new ideas, intolerant, judgmental, hypocritical, and even inclined to hate. In their book, *A Heretic's Guide to Eternity*, Spencer Burke and Barry Taylor put it this way:

"There seems to be so much anger and hatred in the name of Christianity. The popular cultural stereotype of Christians as a bunch of uptight, angry, joyless, and dogmatic people is usually affirmed at least once a week by...someone predicting God's judgment on a city for banning the theory of intelligent design in schools, for instance, or calling down hell and brimstone on towns that refuse to have a manger scene on public lands during the year-end holidays." (p. 104-105)

Whew! Who wants to be associated with that crowd? So we figure, best to keep a low profile, best to keep our lips zipped when it comes to God. After all, who wants to risk being thought a fanatic? Who wants to be accused, as those first disciples were, of being drunk at 9 o'clock in the morning. So we make Christianity into something that's strictly private and personal, just between us and God. It's kind of like your medical history, strictly between you and your doctor, it's no one else's business, we surely don't talk about *that*. We buy into the culture's passion for individualistic spirituality, the notion that we can be spiritual people all by ourselves, apart from a community. Some even convince themselves that church is optional for Christians, that we can be lovers of God without being in relationship with others struggling to do the same. But our tradition has always emphasized that it's just not possible to live the Christian life without belonging to the community we call the church. But in our individualistic society, doing community is hard. Sometimes we want the easy way. If religion's just a private and personal thing, then we never have to talk about it.

Or we can get to thinking that Christianity is just a bunch of ideas or doctrines, not something you live but something you know. We think it's all about knowing the correct answers, rather than exploring questions in the company of others. And if it's all about knowing the right answers, then we have to be very careful so we don't let on that we're not always sure what those right answers are supposed to be. So we keep silent. No one wants to be embarrassed.

And in the church, we have a hard time talking about God with one another. We struggle to find a vocabulary that allows us to talk about seeing God at work in the world and in

our lives. So we reassure ourselves that talking about God must be a job for experts, we pay them to do that for us, don't we, so we don't have to. And because we are silent with each other when it comes to spiritual matters, we may find ourselves thinking, I must be the only one who's not sure how to talk to God, how to know if God is speaking, or how to figure out what God's plan for me might be. I must be the only one who isn't sure if there really is a God who cares about me. I must be the only one who's not sure I even know who the Holy Spirit is. So the silence and isolation deepens. It reminds me a little of a story I heard about a therapist whose patients included two men who were partners in the same medical practice and worked side by side every day. Neither knew they shared a therapist, and it would have been unethical for the therapist to tell them. But, it turns out, they shared a problem. Both felt deeply alone, isolated from others, and deeply dissatisfied in their practice. The therapist asked Dr. X: "Have you considered talking with Dr. Y about it?" to which Dr. X responded: "Him? He'd never understand." And when the therapist asked Dr. Y the same question, the response was similar. "That would be silly. Dr. X is perfectly happy and satisfied, I couldn't talk to him, he wouldn't get it."

It doesn't have to be that way for us in the church. Because you see, on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came to a little group of frightened, silent individuals, and transformed them into a community, the church. And the church is a special kind of community, a community that, by the power of God, is energized to live differently.

One of the extraordinary things the church is empowered to do is to break down barriers. We don't have to hold each other at arms length, because we can speak each other's languages, we can understand and be understood across our differences. All of that happened at Pentecost when the first church began. So we don't have to fear being open with each other, talking about God, asking questions, sharing the doubts and dry periods we all have in our spiritual lives, sharing our dreams and visions and the things that scare us. The Spirit has empowered us to do that. That's part of what it means to be the church.

The biggest misconception we have about church is that it's a place you go to when you have your act together. Groucho Marx used to say he wouldn't join any organization that would accept someone like him. That could easily be a description of the church; it's the place where people like you and me can come and know we'll always be welcome. Anyone who trusts God, even a little, can become a member. And today is a day of rejoicing here at Vernon, because we have five new members, three of whom are completely new to us and two who have become active again after a period of being inactive. So it's a good day to remind ourselves about the nature of the church. It's not a museum for the perfect to showcase themselves, it's a home for the imperfect, a place where we know we'll always be loved and welcomed and cared for, a place we can be safe as we learn to be more open to the Spirit's power to make everything new, including us. Fortunately, Jesus didn't insist we get perfect before he'd come close to us. The Spirit has empowered us to be the same with one another.

The church is also the place where we get the courage to break out of silence and find our voice—so we can speak about God, about what God has done in Jesus, about what God wants to do through us. Finding our voice is important. Because as long as we don't talk

about a God who is loving and inclusive, as long as we don't talk about a faith that inspires us to reach out in love to the world, the cultural understanding of the Christian faith will be determined by those who do these things. The church is the place where we receive the Spirit's energy and passion, so we can go out to share God's message of love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ with the whole world.

It all began when God poured out the gift of God's Spirit on that first church , on that first Pentecost. It's still happening today. We have the power to do amazing things, and not because any of us individually are amazingly good, amazingly knowledgeable or even because we work amazingly hard. We can do amazing things because we are the church and the Spirit is here, a Spirit that roars like wind and burns like fire and feels like power that has no end.

Thanks be to God. Amen.