

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Shelli Latham, Associate Pastor
“Causing a Scene”
Acts 2:1-13
Pentecost
May 23, 2010

They're drunk. They've got to be wasted. I have no idea what is going on in there. Come here, come here, you have got to see this. How is this possible? Shh . . . shh . . . I want to hear what they're saying.

The crowd grew bigger and bigger around the twelve. Dad's hoisted their children onto their shoulders to give them a better view and keep them from getting smooshed as the swarm pressed in on them. Women dropped their baskets of first fruits for the temple. Grandmas dropped their jaws. Grandpas' minds reeled for any other time something so totally unexplainable had happened at the feast of Pentecost or any time really. They were awestruck, confused, excited, inspired, transfixed. They were elbowing, high fiving, wagering, wondering. They were thousands . . . thousands and thousands and thousands of people converging upon Peter and the other 11. They were there for a birthday, though they didn't know it - there to witness, to participate in the wind and fire and Spirit-infused birth of the Christian church.

That's what we celebrate on Pentecost - the gift of the Spirit, the gift of the church. So happy birthday to us! Not a whole lot has changed. The church is still her Spirit-infused self, billowing with wind, dancing with fire that draws the skeptical and lost like moths to her flame for the sake of curiosity and warmth. Right? Nothing has changed. The church is still her bold and courageous self, speaking hope to the nations in their native tongue - uncontained as a wildfire, igniting the dryness of despair with the blaze of hope. Nothing has changed.

Except that I don't recognize the church in our scripture today. Our great, great, great, great grand-mama church, she had some pep in her step and fire in her belly. She was a show off, about as sophisticated as a midnight skinny dip. That girl, that church was causing a scene. And I look out . . . at this church that I love, and I don't see her here.

The truth is I am comfortable with our neat rows of white pews and worshippers not invading one another's personal space. I'm comfortable not stepping on toes with look-at-me, look-at-me proclamation or demanding too much attention. I'm comfortable not being extreme. I'm comfortable with how decent and in order we have things around here. And I'm terrified of relinquishing even a smidge of control. I'm terrified of how completely undignified it could be to get swept up in the Spirit. But frankly, I'm bored. And I'm a little jealous and disappointed in myself. The ones who defy expectation, who misbehave a little, the ones who play with fire and talk to strangers - they have the best stories. I don't want my faith legacy to be, "She looked tall behind the pulpit and 3 out of 4 Sundays, she could get us out of here in an hour."

God birthed a Church that was *pretty* unconventional, totally obvious and mighty wound-up. God birthed a church that caused people to gawk. God birthed a church, that in its first crying

breath witnessed to those outside of itself - in words it didn't know were inside of itself. I'm scared of that church, but I'm also scared that in my attachment to civility and my hesitance to let loose that I may never really know what it is like for God to truly pour God's Spirit into me and set me twirling like a top into a world of need.

Why are we so afraid of the Spirit? Last week, when meeting with the session, one of our confirmands, Jay Fesperman, talked about the God he knows as creator, the God he meets in nature as he barrels down mountains on his bike. He talked of Jesus, as God's son, as savior and friend. Then he said, "The Holy Spirit is just a puzzle to me." Me too, Jay. The Holy Spirit is a puzzle, a slippery one - peaceful as a dove, gentle as the ocean breeze, fierce as a gale storm, a fire that does not consume. He . . . she . . . it . . . is confusing and illusive, no wonder it's scary turning ourselves, our church over to the less heralded member of the trinity.

But I think it's more than that. I think we're afraid that that mysterious prankster of a Spirit might just have us do something embarrassing. "They're drunk on cheap wine," someone yells from the back of the crowd. Intoxicated by the Spirit, there's no telling what kind of crazy nuts we might look like to a world which expects so little of its fellow human beings. We're afraid of what it might look like or sound like, what it might feel like to lose ourselves in a Spirit-filled spectacle.

I say that we're afraid to be a spectacle, but that's not entirely true. We're a culture that thrives on attention. We read tabloids in the checkout line hungry for the next celebrity mishap. We try on umpteen million dresses for that party, eager for the compliment or to at least not to blend into the wall paper. Our need for attention has gone viral, and we can keep folks up-to-date on our every status change on 13 different technological devices at once. We're not afraid to be noticed.

A couple of weeks ago, I was jogging past the Davidson IB School, several students were on the steps, waiting for the doors to be unlocked. They (many of them, our very own youth) looked like crazy nuts. They had on multi-colored, mismatched socks, plaids paired with polka-dots, partnered with argyle, lopsided, Pippi Longstocking braids, bathing suits over their clothes. It was tacky day, part of spirit week. These are youth who were showing some serious school spirit and not afraid to make a spectacle of themselves.

We paint signs, our faces, our entire bodies, wear multi-colored wigs and wave foam fingers at any variety of sporting events. Loud and raucous and look at me, look at me. We are not afraid of causing a scene. We shout "We've got spirit, yes we do. We've got spirit, how 'bout you?" at pep rallies, corporate training event, all kinds of places . . . but not in here and not really in our faith life out there. Face it, we get sweaty palms when the choir kicks up a spiritual and there is any hint that we might have to clap along.

There are churches causing a scene right now. Fred Phelps' church, the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas causes a scene with its "God Hates Fags" website and "Thank God for Dead Soldiers" signs held-up outside military funerals. Over 1.2 million people have joined the Obama Death Prayer group on Facebook, and pastors are openly praying for the death of the

president.¹ There are churches making a scene - not a Pentecost scene, not a scene which points to the grace of God in Technicolor and simultaneous translation for all people, but they are clamoring and calling themselves church. Why does it seem that the churches who remember how to raise a ruckus are the ones who spew hate? Have we made ourselves so flame retardant that we can never catch fire with the Spirit? Are we so fearful of being Pentecostal people that we will allow the smoke and mirrors of distorted Gospel to be paraded around as church?

We're afraid to cause a scene, but it's in our blood. Letting loose in the Spirit is at the very core of who we are as a church and how we got to be a church in the first place. "They're drunk on cheap wine,"² someone yelled from the back of the crowd. "That's when Peter stood up and, backed by the other eleven, spoke out with bold urgency: 'Fellow Jews, all of you who are visiting Jerusalem, listen carefully and get this story straight. These people aren't drunk as some of you suspect. They haven't had time to get drunk—it's only nine o'clock in the morning.'" (vv. 14-15)

Maybe you didn't hear it when the wind filled this place like God had exhaled. Maybe you didn't see it, when the Spirit blazed through - a streak of sunset, like a ribbon dancer gone wild. Maybe you didn't know that Jesus promised he would send his Spirit. Maybe we didn't know what the Spirit would ask of us.

And then he preached, "This is what the prophet Joel announced would happen: 'In the Last Days,' God says, 'I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people: Your sons will prophesy, also your daughters; Your young men will see visions, your old men dream dreams. When the time comes, I'll pour out my Spirit on those who serve me, men and women both, and they'll prophesy.'" (vv. 16-18)

3000 people joined the church that day, aching to be part of something, trusting that the crazy Spirit that was poured out on the disciples would one day be poured out on them too. They came for the clamor, and they met a God who is unusual, and pyrotechnic and alive. I bet the disciples were afraid - afraid of the flames, afraid of the claim that the Spirit had on them - a claim that demanded that they be more than who they were, a claim that had them lose themselves in God. I imagine they were afraid that the crowd would mock them or turn on them. But they succumbed to God's grace unraveled in fire. They open their mouths to speak the word of God in languages that all could understand. And in that moment they became more than their individual selves. They became the church. They became the body of Christ - the fired-up, Spirit-dancing, undignified body of Christ.

Today, we have 19 creative, thoughtful, energetic youth joining the church as part of this year's confirmation class. It's not 3000, but they come for the same reasons those first Christians did. They come to be a part of something big and important and life-giving. They come because

¹ Wiley Drake, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church, in Buena Park, California, according to Associated Baptist Press, http://www.abpnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4126&Itemid=53. Pastor Steven Anderson, of Faithful Word Baptist Church, in Tempe, AZ, according to Fox News, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2009/08/31/phoenix-pastor-draws-protests-telling-church-prays-obamas-death/>.

² Acts 2:13. All scriptural citations are taken from *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, a paraphrase by Eugene Peterson.

though the words defy them sometimes, they want to be part of something transformative. They come in gratitude, and they come in hope. They will tell you they don't think the church is doing enough to care for the world. They will tell you that maybe we ought to try a few firecrackers in worship, because the Pentecost church sounds like a pretty hoppin' place. They will tell you that God can make ordinary people do extraordinary things. I know this, because that is what they told me when we brainstormed for the sermon that would be preached on the day they joined the church.

What will you tell them? Will you tell them that the church grew up and set-aside her jaw dropping ways? Or will you tell them that the spirit they see on Monday night lights is nothing compared to the Spirit that rolls through the Body of Christ - that there are times for reverence and order but there are times to cut loose, to talk loud, to shout out God's message of all-inclusive grace and to make a spectacle of yourself for the love of God?

Will you tell them the scary truth that we are part of a tradition that plays with fire and talks to strangers and acts a little crazy sometimes? That God says, "I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people: Your sons will prophesy, also your daughters; Your young men will see visions, your old men dream dreams?" (Acts 2:16-17) Will you tell them that someday . . . today, or tomorrow or a long, long time from now, God will pour out God's Spirit on all of us - on them, on you, on me. And when that happens, as scary as it is, it is okay to trust in that crazy, world-dazzling Spirit, to cut loose and cause a scene.