

To Widen the Circle

The Spirit reveals and reconciles

A sermon by The Rev. Drew Downs

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Pentecost C | Acts 2:1-21

As Jesus ascends, two men appear and ask

"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?"

Of course, these aren't random strangers, these men robed in white.

But we recognize the confusion in the situation - of Jesus leaving - *really* leaving this time. The apostles knew he was going, but they were surprised to see him come back. They knew that he wasn't going to stay; not be with them forever. Not as they knew him, anyway. But did they know what to do next? The day Jesus left again?

They do what they have been doing: they go to the temple and they praise GOD. Ceaselessly.

But what then? What next? Where is this Jesus Movement going to go now that Jesus isn't there to lead it?

Peter steps up and fills the void. And his response is so human. His first act is to deal with their ecclesiastical problem of only being 11 apostles, not 12. Is there a better example of how the church would respond to its problems than to say *Welp, we are supposed to have 12, but by my count there are only 11. We could wait until the next annual meeting, but we need to be at full strength. So let's vote.*

I don't blame Peter or the Apostles for not knowing what to do next. Jesus certainly could have been clearer. He could have left a church-building manual. Preferably with diagrams and written by people fluent in their native language.

No matter how much Jesus has warned them about his departure, what they are to do in his absence, or how much training he has given them, they are not prepared for this second act in the play, in which we all discover the protagonist isn't Jesus, but humanity. And in this second act, we have to deal with the responsibility of proclaiming the Good News ourselves.

"But we've always done it that way!"

Proclaiming the Good News is our work. Like it was theirs. This event: the coming of the Holy Spirit as tongues above the heads of the Apostles, the sound, a violent sound: is intense. It is naturally a game changer. One the apostles don't expect but find themselves rolling with anyway. Imperfectly, for sure. How could they not? They aren't Jesus.

But their lives now begin to parallel his - a baptism, ministry, proclaiming the coming of GOD, their being hunted, tried, and killed.

They don't know what to do. But they find themselves immersed in a world in which they have to act anyway.

They don't say "We've never done it that way before!" but you know they are thinking it; scouring, even then, all that Jesus taught them, all they knew of Messiahs and movements for answers.

We, on the other hand, say this a lot. We are obsessed with sameness and the supposedly unchanging character of life, of faith, and especially, of GOD.

And yet here is a new thing. Here is a GOD among them. A changed script and a new revelation. Loud and violent. Hard to take and deeply troubling. If the Pentecost doesn't scare you, then either you are not paying attention or you are not paying attention to the consequences.

Because GOD is taking your "But we've never done it that way" and going {poof!} Suddenly, it is engulfed in a fireball. And he tosses it back and says "Go. Make something happen."

Wild Spirit

The implications of a GOD who does new things is that GOD can change the script on us. At any moment.

Jesus said as much in the parables of the bridesmaids, the wicked tenants, the Good Samaritan, Prodigal Sons. Jesus speaks of urgency and changing how we see the world.

These stories don't affirm what we already believe about a static world, already redeemed, reconciled, and made one with GOD in perfection (we know that isn't the truth). But they are a foretaste of what is coming.

GOD breaks into the world and shows us how much we are loved. That we, despite our different languages, might hear the Good News natively - not in translation - not my version of the Good News, but yours, ours, all, each.

And this Good News is truth. A difficult truth. A truth that is violent to our ignorance and expectations. It is bombast and frightening. And so much bigger than you and I. The Spirit is wild and untamed. She goes where *she* wants and is not going to wait for you and me to get with the program. If we don't get it, she'll find someone else. And if she can't find someone, she'll make stones sing.

The Spirit is moving. And lest we think she is fond of such human words like "traditional" and "orthodoxy" I will remind you what the Spirit fills Peter's heart with: radical equality.

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.

The Spirit is coming to all that lives. She is coming to men and women; young and old; slave and free. This stuff of separation: of ecclesiology and who gets to be in and who gets to be out: that stuff is being shattered, obliterated by the Spirit.

Widening the Circle

Eventually, Peter regains rational thinking and the radical love of the Spirit is tempered by prudence and sound judgment. Jesus's followers will divide and shun and ignore the love.

Yet, the rest of Acts is, in many ways, the Spirit driving Jesus's followers to greater equality, sharing, and love *in spite of themselves*. And when the people in the circle have trouble making it happen, the Spirit widens the circle further.

Stephen and the deacons. Paul. The gentiles. Acts is a story of GOD's rebellion against orthodoxy and safety. GOD's rebellion against the limits we place on GOD. It is a wild, untamed Spirit of radical equality and rebellion. There *is* nothing safe about what GOD is doing here - *for the institution*. There is safe for the

lover, for the Spirit-filled and the giver. There is plenty of safe for faith that is expressed to GOD and given to friends.

Pentecost, with its loud, violent wind, its flaming tongues, and its utter chaos of voices which resound into a symphony of unity in diversity, is about GOD so utterly changing the game we *still* aren't sure how to play it.

People like to refer to this Feast we call Pentecost as "the birthday of the church" which is about as honest to the disrupting as it is domesticating to the Wild Spirit we celebrate. The Spirit didn't midwife the church, for if she had, there would have been a whole bunch of women among those men; a whole bunch of children and senior citizens joining those fishermen; a whole bunch slaves and gentiles and Samaritans and eunuchs and let's name those we struggle to include today: the LGBT, the disabled, the mentally ill, the criminal, the homeless.

The Spirit widens that circle beyond our comfort zone.

And with that widening she answers that first question: what do we do now?

What do we do? We live! We serve! We preach!

And we love. We widen our circle. We share in common. And we make the story of Jesus ever on our lips.

Most importantly, we let the Spirit move us, not away from the trouble, the fear, the confusion, but toward it. That we might find GOD there. Resting. Eating with those struggling to survive outside the comfort and safety of the circles we create and perpetuate.

Come Holy Spirit come!