

The Power of Pentecost (1 of 2)

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North Texas/Rocky Mountain Conferences
United Methodist Church
May 5, 1990

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(1 of 2)

Acts 2:1-21

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."

But Peter, standing with 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. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. 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.*

It is Pentecost again. We have heard a text that we probably know almost by heart. As each word is read, we already know what the next word will be. There is nothing new here. And so, in the midst of all the excitement and all the expectations of Annual Conference, and we greet this text, and we greet the Pentecost, with a great yawn. We have been here before. We know what it's all about. Let's move on to something new.

For that reason, the very first point to be made about this text is that Pentecost is scary. We are so used to hearing the story that we no longer realize what it must have been like for those who lived through it. We know that it is a miracle. We know that it has a happy ending. Yet look at the text again as if you had never heard it and try to imagine the situation. Here all these people are together in one place praying, and *suddenly*, a sound came from heaven *like a mighty wind*, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. Were that to happen right here, now, we might think that the weather service had failed to warn us of a sudden storm. "And there

appeared to them *tongues as of fire.*" Could it be that a volcano has erupted, and fire is raining from the sky? It is only after these and other, frankly frightening, events that we are told that it was all a positive thing, a miracle from God, an outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

So, the very first point, a simple but all-important point, is that the action of the Spirit is not always comforting. It is easy to speak of the Spirit as Comforter. But the Spirit is also cleansing fire and a mighty wind. And it is only by the Spirit that we are able to see the action of God in the fires and winds of our day.

You know that I am a church historian, and, therefore, a bit of history may not be out of place. There was a time, back in the fifth century, when the very existence of Christianity seemed to be threatened. It was the time of what our textbooks call "the barbarian invasions," when all of Western Europe was overrun by the Germanic peoples. From a distant monastery in Palestine, St. Jerome moaned: "The world goes to ruin... Churches which were once revered are in an area now but dust and ashes." But in Spain, which had been overrun by the barbarians, a Christian by the name of Paulus Orosius, who himself has suffered much and lost much declared:

If only to this end have the barbarians been sent within the Roman borders. . . that the Church of Christ might be filled with Huns and Suevi, with Vandals and Burgundians, with diverse and innumerable peoples of believers, then God's mercy be praised... even if this has taken place through our own destruction.

He was right, for as I look around this church today, I see many here who are the descendants of those Suevi, Vandals, Goths, and Burgundians. And we are here partly because of what happened at the time of Paulus Orosius.

And so, it is with us today. We see all kinds of movements around us. Sometimes it may seem that the very foundations of the church as we have known are shaking, that the mighty winds of change threaten to sweep it away. We hear noises, and we fear. We see new peoples, new movements, and we wonder. And yet, could it not be that, even through changes that we find threatening, God is at work opening up a new future, as on that first day of Pentecost?

Let us set that first point aside for a moment and look at a second point that should be obvious from our text but which we often forget: The miracle of Pentecost does not consist in everybody hearing the message in the same language. It is not that those who were unable to understand the Aramaic that the disciples spoke were now somehow given the power to understand that language. It is rather that somehow the message was heard in the native language of the Parthians, the Medes, the Elamites. This is not melting-pot inclusiveness. Parthians are not told that they have to learn the language and the ways of the Galileans in order to hear the message. The message comes to them as Parthians.

If we are to be an inclusive church after the manner of Pentecost, we must be a church in which all can hear and speak the message, so to speak, in their own tongue. Too often the image we

have of an inclusive church is one in which all are welcome, as long as they are willing to become like us. I see this often: "We are an inclusive church. Everyone is welcome. As long as they are properly schooled, and properly dressed, properly employed. After all, we are a proper church."

In first-century Palestine, there were strong nationalistic feelings, especially as the country was overrun politically by the Romans and culturally by Greeks. There were those who insisted on the need to preserve the cultural purity of the people of God and who looked on all strangers as a threat to the well-being of the nation. Yet the Spirit does not endorse a "Hebrew-only" policy.

Enough on this second point. As we say in Spanish, "al buen entendedor, pocas palabras bastan" --"for those who have understanding, a few words suffice."

The third and most important point requires that we look again at the text. Who are the scoffers who say, "They are filled with new wine"? And who are they scoffing at? The common picture is that the scoffers are those who gathered when they heard the noise and that they are laughing at the disciples. But if you look again at the text, you may draw a different picture. The text actually says that those who heard the disciples were amazed, "because each heard in them

speaking their own native language." The miracle is perceived first of all not by the disciples, who are simply speaking of the mighty works of God. Presumably they could understand each other, but to them there was nothing new about that. The miracle is perceived by the outsiders who suddenly find themselves included.

And yet there are some who mock. Why? Presumably because they did not perceive the miracle. How could anyone have been present at such an event and not have perceived the miracle? The answer is simple, once you stop to think about it. The mockers are people who do not perceive the miracle because they expect to understand anyhow. A Parthian who did not expect to hear his language would be astonished, especially as he realized that a Cappadocian next to him could also understand what was being said. But a native of Jerusalem, someone who was used to understanding what was said, would have greater difficulty in perceiving the miracle. And so, they laugh. They laugh at the disciples who speak, and they laugh at those around them, who act as if something extraordinary were taking place. "Why are these people so excited? Haven't they ever heard someone addressing a crowd in our native language, the language that most folk around here speak? What's the big deal?" And so they conclude, "They are filled with new wine."

What we have here is another instance of a theme that is quite common in Scripture: that those who seem to have the inside track are precisely the ones who are in greater danger of being left out, of not perceiving the miracle.

And the same is true today. As I move about the church today—not just the United Methodist Church in the United States, but the Church of Christ throughout the world—I find people everywhere who are convinced that the church is a miracle. In California, working among poor Hispanics, I find a young man who grew up in one of the worst areas of the Bronx and is now completing his PhD in theology. "Ever since I was thirteen," he tells me, "Christmas for me meant jail. First it was alcohol and fights. Then it was drugs. Until one day I came to church. Church is the miracle in my life." In Eastern Europe, people who lived through the hard years of Stalin tell us that the events of the last few months are a miracle, but that the miracle was always brewing in the other deeper miracle of a church that somehow, by the power of the Spirit, continued its life even when all the powers of the world were set on its death. In South Africa, in China, in Guatemala, and El Salvador. Everywhere I find people who perceive the church as the miracle in their lives. The one place where I least find such perception is in the white, relatively affluent suburbs of the United States, most particularly places where there are four churches on one street corner. O! The church is still a miracle. We simply don't see it. We don't see it because, like those natives of Jerusalem at the time Pentecost, we expect it to be there. We expect it to speak our language. We expect it to welcome us. And so, we miss the miracle.

We all know this text. Some of us know part of it by heart: "and your sons and your daughters shall prophecy; and your young people will see visions; and your old people shall dream dreams." It sounds poetic. It sounds exciting.

And yet, as we look at the text, we see that Peter is not speaking to the other apostles, nor to those others around him—the men and women who have received the Spirit and who have perceived the miracle. He is speaking to the scoffers, to those who say, "They are filled with new wine." He is speaking to those who, caught up in the humdrum of their own lives, cannot perceive the miracle. They do realize that something strange and out of the ordinary is happening. But they explain it away as part of ordinary human experience: "They are filled with new wine."

They cannot perceive the miracle, because they expect to understand. And therefore, they do not really understand.

But there is an even deeper reason why people are unable to perceive a miracle such as this. It would upset their lives. And here we come back to the first point: Pentecost is a frightening thing. Look at the crowd of scoffers. Let your eyes roam them. There you see old Joshua. He is an old man. He has worked all his life. Now he is happily retired. He has left his wife Judith back at home, preparing a nice meal for them and for their children and grandchildren who are coming for supper to celebrate Pentecost. It's a beautiful morning, and he has gone out on a stroll. He is content. Life is good.

And then, just as he turns a corner, he comes upon this crowd. There is an old man, just like him. But his eyes are alight with new life, as if he were dreaming dreams that are only for the

young. "Drunken fool!" says Joshua, but what he really means is, "if I don't watch out, I'll get caught up in this thing. And goodbye happy retirement!" And then he sees these young women. One of them looks like his granddaughter Rebecca. What would happen if Rebecca began acting like that!? God forbid! And that woman, she is about Judith's age. She should be home cooking for her family and not making a spectacle of herself.

So, old Joshua decides that they are all drunk, and he hurries on to his home, and to his wife, and to his family, and to his meal, and to his contented retirement. And he misses the miracle.

But what about us? Do we see the miracle? Are we even able to see the miracle? Or are we so content in our own lives, so afraid of a life that could be different, that we shut it out, and in our own ways say, "they are filled with new wine"?

"And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy." Three years ago, I was lecturing in Cali, Colombia. One afternoon a family took me out to see the city—the parents, a son of eighteen, and an older daughter who was a seminary student. We saw the beautiful avenues and the fancy hotels that tourists always see, but we also saw the vast seas of cardboard and tin hovels, stretching as far as the eye could see. People who have been pushed out of their land by drug barons and international agribusiness. It had rained that week, and the whole area was flooded. Human excrement floated along the streets in which children were playing. The eighteen-year old was telling me about a weekly radio program he and a group of friends were

running. "People in Colombia do not know that this exists," he told me. "So, I come to areas like this every week, and I interview people, and on Saturday afternoon I put it on the air. Some people don't like it."

Sometime later, when the father and I were alone, he looked at me with tear-filled eyes and said, "They'll probably kill him for what he is doing." I thought his next words would be, "It's terrible how these young people get such ideas in their heads." But no, he smiled and said, "But we are Christians. I raised him for this. I must share his dream."

"Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young people shall see visions, and your old people dream dreams." The church of Jesus Christ, the church of the Spirit, is a miracle. And if we do see it, it is because, like old Joshua, we are so content in our humdrum lives, in our humdrum security, perhaps even in our humdrum Annual Conferences, that we would rather say of people like that young man and his father, "they are dreamers, they are fanatics, they are filled with new wine." But remember, when you do so, you place yourself alongside the scoffers who on that day of Pentecost mocked the Spirit of God.

And the text goes on: "Yea, and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy."

What the text actually says is "slaves," male slaves and female slaves. We prefer to say "servants" because, after all, we are not a slave-holding society. Perhaps not, but we come pretty close to it. In every one of our major cities, there is a large underclass of people held there, kept there by fetters almost as strong as those that some slaves used to wear. Kept there by racism, by lack of educational opportunities, by malnutrition, by unemployment, by drugs, by disease, by bureaucratic systems that foster dependency, by negative self-images, by the priorities of our national budget, by our own indolence, and perhaps even by our own convenience.

I have been in a neighborhood in the Bronx, that were I to live there, I would be selling drugs, not to make money, but to go to jail and get out of there! In the middle of that neighborhood there is a church. Oh, we probably wouldn't *really* call it a church. They meet in a storefront covered with graffiti, and to get in you have to thread your way through garbage that the city hardly ever collects, and among drunks and other assorted people who are treated as just so much garbage. Even in the church itself there is a strong smell; and it is not of incense.

But that church is a miracle. It is a miracle of the Spirit. For in that church gathers what many would call the scum of our society, the equivalent of the slaves of our text, and they prophesize! They prophesize by their very existence, showing a world mired in hatred and despair that there is love, that there is hope. They prophesize by merely being there, for a number of them, with the help of the church, have attained a measure of education, and they could move to a better

neighborhood. Yet they remain there. And amid drug raids and whining sirens they speak a word of hope.

"Fools," we say. "Don't they know that there is no hope? Don't they see the magnitude of the problem? Why don't they get out while the getting is good? They are dreamers. They are filled with new wine."

And so we mock the Spirit. We mock the Spirit in the name of common sense. But we really mock the Spirit because otherwise, like old Joshua, our contented life would be threatened. Were we to recognize that what those people are doing, they are doing by the power and under the command of the same Spirit whom we claim to worship, we would be forced to do something about it. We would be forced to do something about our national priorities, about an educational policy that puts money only where money already is, about a church that all too often simply reflects the divisions in our society, about our own indolence.

"Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young people shall see visions." Sounds very good. But are we really ready to see it in our own midst? When the young people in our church, when our own children, reject the notions of success by which our society lives, and come to us with a different vision of life, will we see the work of the Spirit in it? Or will we say, "that's youth, just wait till you grow up and have to face reality. You are filled with new wine"?

"And your old people shall dream dreams." There is not one of us here who is so old that the Spirit cannot instill in us a new dream! A dream of people understanding each other, as on that first Pentecost. A dream of people eating together, as in the final banquet that the Lord has promised. A dream of the Spirit alive in us, no matter how old and how weak the flesh may be. Poor old Joshua, that day in Jerusalem he was offered the opportunity to dream again, to live again, to be alive in the Spirit. But no. He went back home, told his wife about the strange sermon he had heard, and simply. . . kept. . . growing. . . old.

My friends, in this season of Pentecost, the Spirit is in our midst, offering new life to each of us and to this Annual Conference. And, as on that first Pentecost, the options are clear: We may do business as usual. We may consider and approve budgets, hear committee reports, assure ourselves that ours is a respectable church. No one will fault us for that. No one will mock and say that we are filled with new wine. On the contrary, the world will understand, for we shall be just like everything else around us. And, like everything else around us, like poor Joshua, we shall continue growing old and tired.

Or we may stand ready to do new things, to grasp new visions, to seek a shape for our ministry that really speaks to the Parthians and the Elamites among us, that really empowers the young

and the old. They will say that we are crazy, that we are filled with new wine, that we do not know the score in today's world. But we shall be obedient.

The choice is ours.

