

## *When the Spirit Moves*

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June 12, 2011, Pentecost, Binkley Baptist Church

Numbers 11:24-30; Acts 2:1-21

### I.

One of the least noticed holidays in the Christian year is Pentecost. At least on this continent, there is no civil observation of Pentecost, there are no Pentecost sales, no day off. Yet in the grand history of Christianity it is one of the high holidays.

Sometimes called the “Birthday of the church” the event Pentecost marks took place on the Jewish festival of weeks, or “First Fruits”, seven weeks—fifty days actually—after Passover, a day that also celebrated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai! Yet Pentecost rapidly came to have its own meaning for the early Jewish followers of Jesus. For it was on that festive day, several weeks following the death and resurrection of Jesus, that some of those gathered in a Jerusalem crowded with pilgrims from other lands experienced the Spirit of God in a whole new way.

The word for Spirit in both Hebrew and Greek does not mean “spirit” as in ghost. The word means breath. It also means wind! And it suggests the presence, the very close presence, the *movement* of God. The disciples who had experienced the aching absence of Jesus on this day suddenly knew the Spirit was moving among them. As Acts describes it, something happened that first Pentecost almost beyond the power of words to convey: a sound like a loud rushing wind; divided tongues of fire, resting on each of them, many people speaking, able to understand each other as though in their own languages—people so carried away that others sneered and said they were drunk!

Something happened that Pentecost day, something that turned the world upside down, for the followers of Jesus and for many others, who that day, beholding evidence of the reality and power and presence of God’s Spirit, chose to begin new lives, new lives blown by the Wind of God.

### II.

There are so many lessons we can draw from the encounter that happened among the folk in that room long ago. And yet there is one aspect that is easily missed. Here it is—*Christianity* is about people coming together across the deepest divides that fragment humanity!

If Pentecost marks the birthday of the Church, from the point of view of the writer of the Book of Acts anyway, the Church was not born simply because of the teachings of Jesus, nor of the cross, nor even of the resurrection. It didn’t happen on Christmas morning and it wasn’t there yet even on Easter day. No, the Body of Christ came into being later than that, there in the messy middle of a Spirit-filled encounter between people of different cultures and languages in Jerusalem. As they gathered there, people who had no means of understanding each other had an amazing common experience of the Divine Spirit that allowed them to understand each other despite their divisions....

The tongues of fire, the rushing of a holy wind—these were just the gift wrapping. The actual gift was mutual understanding! The deep miracle was the evaporation of the divisions of clan and history and language. *Christianity* didn’t begin until a Spirit rested upon a bunch of people who normally could not make any sense of each other’s words. And in that time together, they somehow knew that they were, in the words of that old Gospel song, “One in the Spirit...one in the Lord.” They sensed that through the movement of this Spirit, there was a profound Unity that was being restored!

I know that some folks get nervous when preachers start to talking about the Holy Spirit. What’s next? Will it be speaking in tongues, dancing in the aisles, or miraculous healings? For the record let me say I fully

support dancing in the aisles! Yet there is a Word to us today more dangerous and lovely than these. Because what we learn from that first Pentecost is that when the Spirit starts to move, a *radically new community* is born, people coming together in common cause who are from all different races and peoples, all different languages and cultures, yea verily even all different kinds of theology!

When the Spirit starts to move, Christianity comes alive. And one defining symptom that it is Christianity and not some cheap imitation is that we find all kinds of different people mixing together, not afraid to try to communicate, not afraid to be one. What makes it real rather than pseudo-Christianity is that we find poor people and rich people starting to talk together, undeterred by differences in education or wealth. We find women and men who are able to move beyond the old divisions of status and place, and learn from each other. We find adults actually listening to youth and children.

What tips us off to the presence of the Spirit is that there is something bigger going on than any of our heritages or groups. What lets us know definitively that this is a God thing and not just a human thing is that the old social groups, the old generational divisions, yea verily even the old insider-outsider dynamics are utterly disrupted, stirred up by a God who is definitely not content to leave well enough alone, who insists on transforming us internally, relationally and communally.

### III.

I don't know about you, but I was taught early on in life that most of the important God action took place a long time ago. We read the bible to learn about things that had happened two thousand years ago, and we were expected to take it on faith. We were taught not to expect too much to happen of a similar nature now. So spoke my teachers, and later, some of my seminary professors.

This is why I love the story of Pentecost, with its surprise visitation upon the disciples and those around them of a new Spirit, one that was going to be with them, to borrow words of the risen Jesus "until the end of the age." While the teachers of my youth were wise women and men, they were wrong about the Spirit's work being done in the long ago and far away. We need look no further than this community right here to find evidence of that same Spirit that arrived with tongues of fire long ago.

We may have a tableful of red candles rather than tongues of fire on our heads. But we are in a holy place today where God has sent us one to another, people of many lands and origins. In this place are Jew and Gentile, people of Chicago land and Mississippi, Boston and Miami. The nations from which we come include Eritrea, Zimbabwe, Burma, the United States, Canada, China, the Netherlands, Germany, Peru, Mexico...and the list goes on, and on. Of those of us originating in this land, we have members from the deep south, from the far west, and at least one from Rhode Island. We even have folks who work for Duke University worshipping hand in hand, at least most of the year, with UNC faculty....

And yet simple diversity by itself, be it ethnic, racial, sexual orientation- or theological, does not by itself attest to the reality and continued power of this Spirit. We know the Spirit's presence is real when our relationships with one another deepen and grow and change, cracked wide open by new friendships, new learnings, free sharing. It is the experience of coming together across the awkwardness, across the old baggage, across the different ways of talking about holy things, that is what tells us this isn't just *us* at work...there is Some One Else in the mix, Something Bigger going on.

Years ago, Clarence Jordan, founder of Koinonia Partners, made a remark to the effect that what set apart the disciples of Jesus from those around them was that individuals who would normally like to kill each other were willing to be part of the same movement. Zealots camping next to tax-collectors! Clarence Jordan understood that when God's spirit gets loose, the old divisions break down, and people are brought together in a new kind of unity.

Clarence Jordan died in 1969, but the community he helped start, which later gave birth to Habitat for Humanity, is still going strong. Yesterday I was at a Habitat house dedication in Chapel Hill for a Karen

family. We were Black and White and Karen under one roof. We sang to God together and prayed in different tongues. It started about 9 O'clock in the morning. And we ate together at a picnic afterwards. We done Clarence proud!

This Binkley Church that you wandered into this morning, whether from force of habit, deep conviction or pure randomness off the street, was from the beginning part of the same faith based movement to end racial supremacy to which Clarence Jordan and others committed earlier. Binkley also was and is a community that believed the church should be open to people of different denominational perspectives.

God continues to open us up. The Spirit won't quit moving. In the 1990's God sent a young gay man who requested to be licensed toward ordination. And the church had to wrestle with one another and with the Spirit's leading. Just a few years ago, the Spirit moved again—and a number of you got involved with the sponsorship of Jarai people, Montagnards from Vietnam: they became some of your closest friends! In January of this year, a group of Chin Christians from Burma found their way to you—and you have heard them sing this morning. In between many others of you have slipped in!

Oh and this week another seminarian came to us, and expressed a desire to be licensed toward ordination! Ray Speller has begun conversation with the deacons. If there is anybody who knows what it means to bridge theological chasms and find ways of talking in different languages in church, it is Ray!

#### IV.

People keep coming to us and God keeps breaking us open! The Spirit is real. The Holy Spirit isn't done with us yet. Our relationships are being broken open yet again. God is still gonna trouble the waters of our expectations and patterns! On this Pentecost Sunday, I give thanks for the evidence of the Spirit's movement in this place. I give thanks for having been brought into your midst myself, as that lovely disorderly peace-creating assumption-destroying unpredictable Spirit keeps on blowing through this community. And it is my prayer that when we who were here today look back upon 2011, and we speak of it to our grandchildren... that the story will be a little like this:

“We knew we were being moved in a way we never had been before. And we started speaking to each other! Really speaking, you know, from the heart. People who could never understand each other before knew now, we just knew what was going on, we felt it, we could sense it. And that was the beginning—or at least it was *A* beginning, a new beginning, when strangers became friends. That was when we learned that this Spirit thing, it isn't just talk. It is more real than we are.”