

Pentecost B
Acts 2:1-21
May 19, 2024

“Becoming Church”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

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—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 the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: ‘People 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.”

~o~

After a very long and boring sermon the parishioners filed out of the church saying nothing to the preacher. Towards the end of the line was a thoughtful person who always commented on the sermons. “Reverend,

today your sermon reminded me of the peace and love of God!” The minister was thrilled. “No-one has ever said anything like that about my preaching before. Tell me why.” “Well,” the parishioner began, “it reminded me of the Peace of God because it passed all understanding and the Love of God because it endured forever!”¹

We’ve all heard one of those sermons, haven’t we? Heck, I’ve preached one of those sermons before! How is it that the church – inaugurated by violent wind, tongues, of fire, xenolalia (speaking in previously unknown languages), and having such a good time that onlookers assumed inebriation – has become best-known for long and boring sermons? Add to that the stereotypes of churches being judgmental, self-righteous, cliquish, greedy, old-fashioned, backward or uninformed in their views on science, and happy to make people feel miserable and you’ve got a real recipe for success, right? What changed?

Dr. Michal Beth Dinkler, Professor of New Testament at Yale Divinity, reminds us that

Throughout Christian history, Pentecost has been described as the birth of the Christian church. In that sense, it is a looking forward, a hopeful inauguration of the task to which the resurrected Jesus called his followers before he ascended into heaven: They are to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth (1:8). Pentecost is the new community’s Opening Day.²

According to the author of Luke/Acts, the new community bursts on to the scene with a bang! Jewish people from around the known world were gathered for the celebration of Succoth, commemorating the time spent living in tents in the wilderness after the Exodus and the giving of the

¹ Stewardshipoflife.org: <https://www.stewardshipoflife.org/jokes/>.

² Michal Beth Dinkler. “Commentary on Acts 2:1-21,” Workingpreacher.org, May 19, 2024: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/day-of-pentecost-2/commentary-on-acts-21-21-17>.

Law. The author tells us that Jesus' followers were together when a sound like the rush of violent wind filled the house where they were sitting. This drew the attention of crowds outside which were further mesmerized when Jesus' followers began speaking to them in their own native languages. I'm assuming that the little flames had burned out by this point. That might have been too much for the crowds!

The experience could hardly be described as boring or old-fashioned and Jesus' followers certainly couldn't be described as cliquish. As for making people feel miserable, that doesn't seem to be happening here either, even without the wine! No, the church is born with a bang and the author tells us that 3,000 people join up on the first day. So, what changed?

I. Folks started seeing the church as a building. It isn't. It never has been. When we see the church as a building that we gather in, we transfer all the agency from the people to a place. It becomes about getting others to come to a place instead of the church going forth to meet other people where they are.

As we said earlier in our Litany of Membership, the church is the assembly – the gathering together – of those committed to Jesus' way, who pledge to share the life and ministry of the community. Sure, that looks like gathering together in a particular place for worship, communion, and care, but it also looks like supporting the ministry of the community through our gifts and our service. And it looks like working for the welfare of both the congregation and the community beyond our doors, while living and loving like Jesus did in the world. The church has never been a building. It has always been a people. It has always been a movement.

II. Another change is that folks started treating church like a country club. Members pay their dues and have access to all the rights and privileges, services and facilities of the club. Nonmembers, outsiders, do not. If an outsider wishes to become an insider – a member – then they need to do what other members do: they need to pay their dues, they need to serve on a committee, they need to dress nicely and attend worship services, they need to enroll their children in education programs, and they need to work to recruit other members who will do the same. But the church has never been a club house. It has always been a people. It has always been a movement.

When new members at New England Church join, we use the word “covenant.” A covenant is an agreement, a promise made by two parties – each one with responsibilities to uphold. A covenant is not fundamentally transactional. It is fundamentally relational. By being in covenant as church, we pledge to love, care, and support one another in the mutual undertaking of *being* the church of Jesus together in this time and place. Again, it’s about being *the* church, not attending *a* church. The church has always been a people. It has always been a movement.

III. A final change that I’ll point out is this: folks got uncomfortable with the spirit. The same spirit described by the author of Luke/Acts blowing through that house like a violent wind, alighting as a flame on the heads of those inside, and driving them outside with a message to proclaim and languages to proclaim it in – that same spirit is scary, is unpredictable, is wild. If there’s one thing that the church and the stock market have in common, it’s that we don’t like the unknown. Spirit was all well and good for those early followers, but not for us. We’ll celebrate it with red paraments and dove balloons and birthday cake, but that’s about as close as we’d like to come to the divine wind that brings change, and uncertainty, and creativity, and new life, and chaos. The church is too

respectable for that. Except that the church is a movement and movements without spirit die or turn into institutions.

We at New England Church, we *know* that the church isn't a building. We *know* that the church isn't a country club. We *know* that the church is a movement driven by spirit and it takes all of us together to truly *be* the church in this time and place. So, let's eat our cake and welcome our new members and expect spirit to show up. We don't know where she will blow us, but I for one, am excited to find out with you. Amen.