**May 20, 2018; Pentecost**

**Acts 2:1-21**

Have you ever been given a gift, only to find out you did not know what it was or what it was for. It can be rather awkward and even a little embarrassing to sit there at the company Christmas party, or at a wedding shower, or your birthday party, and someone hands you a beautiful package. You feel everyone’s eyes on you as you pull off the ribbon and the wrapping paper, open the box and there it is.... But is it a basting tool for the kitchen or a snot sucker for babies? ... is it a head scarf or a table scarf? ... is it a gag gift or a deeply personal gesture from the giver? Should you laugh or cry?

Of course, the person who gave this to you is staring through the crowd with eager anticipation. The pressure builds as you feel compelled to respond to their burning question, "Well, what do you think? Do you like it?" So after the longest pause that you can muster, out of courtesy, you say, "Wow! This is just what I wanted. Thank you … so much! I can really use a new tire pressure gauge." Only to hear them say in a wounded voice, "Tire gauge?! That's a meat thermometer!" [[1]](#footnote-1)

There is something of the same uncertainty and perplexity about Pentecost. The leaders of the early church were sitting around, waiting, as Jesus said they should. They were waiting for the gift of the Spirit. Suddenly, there was the sound of rushing wind – like a tornado or a train – which barreled through the room. Then tongues of something – like fire dancing around the room – appeared over everyone’s head, and each one of them began speaking in other languages. In this moment, they were suddenly immersed – baptized – by the Spirit. But there was no explanation or owner’s manual given.

In dramatic fashion, *somet*hing was given to the church. A gift from God. It probably wasn’t exactly what they wanted, or how they wanted it, being that they had just spent years with Jesus Christ in flesh and blood. But it was *something*. Something to keep. Something to take. And something is better than nothing.

This gift was certainly a surprise to those outside the disciples. As Jews wandered around town in their own Pentecost celebration (50 days after Passover), they were probably still talking about all of the drama around Jesus’ death and resurrection. *They* were not his disciples. They had chosen to stay far away. They were outside the house, after all. But hearing this noise (100 people talking at once in different languages makes a commotion), the outsiders were drawn in to see what was happening.

This gift, this happening, was the Holy Spirit, of course. On Pentecost, God gave the church the gift of the Holy Spirit. To be a Christian and to be part of the Church is to say, "We have received the gift of the Holy Spirit." But when you unwrap the package, what exactly is this gift of the Holy Spirit? Is it a pencil sharpener or a coffee grinder? Is it a tire gauge or a meat thermometer?

And for **us**, when **we** receive this gift today, when **we** read this story and think about the Church, what are **we** supposed to do with this? In a very different world from that of the early church, at a time and place when we are inundated with the babble of the world’s noise, when it seems that no one listens to *anyone* anymore, what does God want us to do with this gift?

The story of Pentecost is a story of “us” and “them.” It’s a story of literal insiders and outsiders. Church members inside the house and people passing outside, in the street. While those outsiders weren’t interested in the Jesus movement or his disciples, they *became* interested when they heard their own language spoken. They were drawn into the community by the sound of something familiar in the midst of the other street noises and foreign languages and even that windy roar.

Those outside the church did not feel or believe as those inside did; instead, they witnessed God at work in other people. They heard someone else’s dreams and prophesies. They saw someone else on fire. It was strange. Some may have wondered, “what?” and “why?” and “how?” But others didn’t wonder, they just wrote off the experience as your local crazy neighbor, already drunk at 9 o’clock in the morning, or maybe still drunk at 9 o’clock in the morning.

This gift of the Holy Spirit was meant to take the disciples into the world, and yet, it also brought the world to the disciples. As those *inside* the church began to speak other languages, embodying the depth and diversity of the world, the world *outside* took notice, and slowed down to listen to those inside.

Today, though, it seems that no one on the outside takes notice of those standing inside the church. Volumes of articles and books are being written on the current revolution (or reformation) of the church. I talk about it myself on a regular basis. Things are not what they were. People aren’t choosing to go to church as they were 50 years ago. People aren’t choosing to participate in church activities as they did 30 years ago. It seems as though those people on the outside are content to keep walking past us down the street. Some Christians don’t seem to notice or care that those outsiders are content to stay out there, but other Christians are downright indignant that people aren’t just pouring off the street into our churches anymore.

Perhaps those people on the street can’t hear us? Perhaps they can hear us, but don’t hear anything familiar? Maybe we are using language and making sounds that don’t make sense to them. Maybe we are standing in places where they can’t hear us.

Perhaps we don’t know what to do with ourselves? Maybe we are still staring and gawking at the life of the Spirit in our midst, aware that we have been given something holy and precious and meant for more than ourselves, but unsure about exactly what to do next.

Any given Sunday you may come to worship and sit in this place with other disciples of Christ. You may not feel the Spirit dancing over your head. You may not feel God’s words bubbling within you, or have clarity about what to do with this gift, or know where to take it. But even if you do not feel it yourself, you will likely see God at work in those around you. Any given Sunday you can notice the Spirit at work in and through our congregation. You can see the food we share which will feed hungry neighbors. You can hear the heartfelt prayers of friends, and feel the utter trust they place in God. You can taste the bread and wine which sustains us. And you see and hear that the Table is not just set for us. While we may be Presbyterians, we are not the chosen people. We are not the only people. We are part of the body of Christ, living, breathing, moving in the world.

Pentecost is a story about opening and expanding. It is not something to keep to ourselves. Pentecost reminds us that God calls us out of our comfortable seats and into the eyes and ears of the world.

Which makes yesterday’s televised Royal wedding between Britain’s Prince Harry and the American Meghan Markle a rather wondrous Pentecostal moment for the world. For about 45 minutes, many millions of people all over the world got up early, stayed up late, and stopped whatever they were doing to watch and listen to Christians pray. People who never go to church heard a fiery African American Episcopalian priest passionately preach in the pulpit of a historic English Chapel. Bishop Curry recalled Martin Luther King’s memory, and invited people to respond to what was taking place then and there, you could see the royal family nervously smile and raise their eyebrows. One interviewer said afterwards that this was an “unconventional” wedding for the royal family and the traditional Church of England. But the Archbishop of Canterbury responded immediately that “There is nothing conventional about Christianity… It puts Jesus Christ and the love of God into the center of the world and blows open the life of the world… This was raw God, and that’s the business we’re in.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

And that is Pentecost. God blew open the center of the world when God sent the Holy Spirit. It was raw God. As unconventional as any introduction, God compelled insiders and outsiders alike to take notice. They were moved to interact with one another and with God.

Pentecost was an awakening of the people, not a change in God. So we, as people who live every day after the Resurrection and after Pentecost, we can wake up. Every day. We can wake up to the gift of God’s presence within us, among us, around us. We can wake up to the blessing of being inside God’s house. And we can wake up to God’s invitation to relationship with those outside.

Let us at Sweet Hollow pray that God will place us near people *inside* the church who can witness to God’s presence around us, and also that we would say and do things that call other people’s attention *outside* to God’s presence here. Awkward, surprising, inspiring, overwhelming, energizing, and empowering. Point it out, praise it, watch it, follow it. But whatever you do, stay near it. Thanks be to God for the gift of the Spirit, and the invitation to ministry in the world.

1. Illustration drawn from Tom Long. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *SkyNews* interview with Archbishop of Canterbury (Justin Welby) and Presiding Bishop of the USA (Michael Curry). Saturday, May 19, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)