



HOMILY “TOGETHER IN ONE PLACE”
SCRIPTURE: ACTS 2: 1-21; JOHN 20:19-23
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
June 4, 2017 Pentecost
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

It started with a curious look through the window on the door outside my office.

After our worship service on Sundays they used our Fellowship Hall for their worship services.

From inside my office I could hear the tambourines and the shouts and the cadence of a people on fire with the Spirit.

It was strange music to me—my first reaction came from the biases I had learned against all things Pentecostal—my family heritage is Presbyterian as far back as you can find Presbyterians and even before that we were French Huguenots—Scottish, English, Scots-Irish.

Coughing in worship was a big deal when I was growing up.

The whole concept of speaking in tongues, of speaking out in church without the words being printed in the bulletin, of spontaneity of any sort in worship was “other” to me.

The otherness of Pentecostal Christians did not just make them hard for me to understand; I had learned to judge them, to dismiss them, even to doubt their veracity.

My glances in the window each Sunday afternoon as they worshipped began as curiosity and then morphed into a courtesy wave to the pastor who one Sunday saw me standing out in the hall looking in.

She was a strong woman, their pastor, her voice unequivocal, her strength undeniable, and her deep peace inviolable.

One Sunday my courtesy wave was met with a gesture from her, Rev. Sanders. She was asking me to come in.

I couldn't say no—that would be rude and it would mean my glances inside were more voyeuristic than I wanted to admit to myself. I had to go in to show them I was sincere about connecting with them when I glanced in that window each Sunday afternoon.

The first couple of times I went in I just took a seat and thanked her for inviting me in. I never knew what was going to happen or how long the services would last, but it soon became something that I actually looked forward to.

They were always happy to see me, always welcoming of the interruption of my arrival. What seemed at first like chaos to me, became a palpable rhythm to worship—starting slow and gathering steam—until someone might begin to shout or weep or even fall out, prompting the whole community to focus in with prayer, laying on of hands, tongues, or admonition of an affliction or lapse.

One week Rev. Sanders asked me to come forward and speak—to share a message, to speak the Word.

I prayed for God's help. And I moved to the front of the room and I opened the Bible and began to read—I can't remember the passage, but I remember the sensation—the strong pull to trust the moment, to not think my way through how I would share Good News with God's gathered people, but to simply speak from my heart—from a place that really meant something—this was the absolute antithesis of phoniness—it was truth they wanted, truth about how God was speaking to me and through me and so I had to get out the way, I had to let the Spirit move.

This fourth generation Presbyterian minister from KY—this child of two college professors with a PhD, let go. I let go of the way I had been taught proper, decent and in order, worship was supposed to go.

It was a Pentecost moment—words that felt effortless and free, and a community of faith that heard their own story in my story, in the glimpse of Gospel that came through.

We were together in that place, in that sacred space. The trials and troubles we had all seen in our lives coalesced in the joy and liberation we all understood—it was God's deeds of power that spoke our common language.

That first Pentecost, that day in Jerusalem—the disciples were doing as Jesus had told them. They were there, together—the people who loved Jesus. And after Jesus' ascension they were praying for what they needed.

This coming together coincided with an especially intense time in Jerusalem—it was the Jewish feast of Weeks that they held 50 days after Passover. That meant that the nations were there in Jerusalem—Jews from far ranging geography.

The ones who loved Jesus were open, they knew they needed help, they were grieving, they were confused. And then, a violent wind and tongues of fire—and the ones who had been on their knees, confused, asking for what they needed—began to

speak in languages they had never known—and this Spirit-filled, Spirit-fired, together in one place bunch of Jesus followers spilled out into the streets of Jerusalem.

What seemed like chaos, brought an effusive and contagious power to the nations together in Jerusalem—and the church was born and learned that it was equipped by the Spirit to fit itself into all different cultures, by speaking the language of their hearts.

God's deeds of power became accessible, translatable, relatable to each, to all.

And it is the Spirit's aggressive, disruptive, upending power that assures God's deeds of power can be seen and heard for all nations.

It is perhaps almost impossible for us to imagine the power of this moment.

It may be far easier for us to recall the denial—while all were astonished and many were transformed by this moment of truth, others sneered—“they must be drunk, they must be crazy”—the human tendency to scrutinize, to demean, to degrade in order to protect ourselves from changing, from the unknown or the other, is a defense mechanism that has certainly stood the test of time. It is no stranger to any of us—it is the dampening, demeaning “no” of those who feel they have too much to lose.

The Spirit's movements can be threatening after all. This is not a delightful breeze that blows through, it is a violent wind—and there will always be some who try to fight it. The Spirit's power is not thwarted by such denial.

Our faith was born, after all, not of such denial, but of surrender to an unruly and unpredictable Spirit that knows how to meet us where we are, ready or not.

The church was born from together in one place—from a conflation of disoriented and earnest, and maybe even a little bit afraid people, and a determined and innovative Spirit.

The together in one place people in that Way of Holiness congregation that invited me in, became my friends, my companions in ministry.

They had been so welcoming to me—so loving, so accepting, so generous. I felt called to invite them to come to our Presbyterian worship on Sunday morning.

They came joyfully—Spirit-filled—they brought their whole selves, their whole faith—tambourines and all.

They had welcomed me so completely, so generously—and many in the Presbyterian congregation welcomed them joyfully as well. And it was a Spirit-filled together in one place worship that day—for a bunch of Presbyterians!

But some sneered—“What is wrong with them. They don’t know how to act in church. It’s rude to shout out during the sermon, they can come, but they should learn how to be respectful.”

The Spirit will not be thwarted by such denial, by such demeaning, degrading resistance from a few.

It’s a comfort to remember that we are not the ones who determine how the Spirit moves and breathes and blows and changes and challenges—we are those who have a choice about how we respond—will we surrender, will we trust, or will deny, will we defend, will we demean.

Yesterday about 24 people spent our Saturday learning and growing together at the Implicit Bias workshop. Together in one place—each of us there hoping to be strengthened in our ability to be God’s people, to share God’s mighty deeds not just with those like us who speak our language and do things our way, but with the diverse world that we are a part of.

One exercise was to move around the church and slow down long enough to really look at some of the symbols around us. What do we see, what do they mean to us, how do they make us feel.

There was one young woman here, who does not go to this church and who shared that she is not a Christian. The symbol she noticed is the one that greeted her when she walked in the front door—the red banner with the cross and flames and the descending dove. “I know this symbol must mean something positive because I can feel what an open and positive place this is, but my first thought when I saw a burning cross was the Ku Klux Klan—and it felt aggressive and disturbing. I know it must mean something else but that was my first reaction. I have no idea what it could mean.”

In this exercise, we had to just listen while people talked until it was our turn. Thank goodness! Because my first reaction was to correct her—to explain to her the true meaning of the cross, to explain away how it made her feel.

But because I had to sit and listen, my mind had time to get past the defensiveness of my initial reaction.

As I shared at the workshop yesterday, with time to prayerfully reflect, her comments helped me remember what can be too easy for us Presbyterians to forget.

Not only do we forget that the whole world doesn't see things the same way we do, but we forget that the Spirit is aggressive, it is disruptive.

The young woman was interested to hear about what the symbol means for us—"I figured it must be something other than what I initially felt." While the Holy Spirit is certainly not allied with the demeaning, the cowardly, the destruction of the Ku Klux Klan, it is also not something to be toyed with or for us to domesticate so that we cease to let it trouble, to let it teach, to let it transform.

The Spirit takes situations and changes our ability to be present, to be messengers of God's mighty deeds.

When the Spirit is moving either get out of the way or get on board—and either way you are in for a change, you will feel yourself in the flow of something you know, without a doubt, you do not control.

What if the Spirit really shows up here, Grace Covenant? And it's not the gentle breeze we prefer—but it's a mighty wind, a refiner's fire, a force that is not here to maintain the status quo but to unleash a Christ-induced rebirth of what it means to be God's people, together in one place, in this place.

The Spirit's unruliness, the Spirit's aggressiveness is threatening to the status quo.

If you feel uncomfortable, the Spirit may be working on you even now—to let go, to surrender to the Holy Ghost we claim we call on to help us be church.

Integrity of faith is not measured in our caution or in our tendency to defend and protect, it is measured in our malleability to Christ's love as it erupts and interrupts and disrupts and breathes new life, new understanding, new perspectives, new ways of healing a fractured world—including us.

Come Holy Spirit—those are not words we should take lightly, nor should we count out their power. These are not words we can avoid if we want to be church.

And they can't just be words—Come Holy Spirit is a prayer for what we need to live the promise of God's mightiest of deeds—that God's people could be together in one place.

Thanks be to God.