

Series Title: “To Be Continued . . . ”
24 May 2015: Day of Pentecost/Memorial Day Weekend
FUMC—Arlington, TX 76011
“Signs and Wonders”—*Preaching Text: Acts 2:1-21*

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He who wonders discovers that this in itself is wonder
(M. C. Escher (1898 - 1972).
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A good question to ponder for Christian believers/stewards is “Why did God call the church into existence?” Because the church has continued, more or less intact for two millennia, we suspect the hand of God provides the church’s foundation. The story of the church’s birth clearly points to the existence of God’s mighty hand. Thus hear our day’s lesson from the Revised Common Lectionary for the Day of Pentecost. It is the story of God empowering the gathered community via the agency of the Holy Spirit. What does this miraculous story have to teach Christians?

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 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. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” 13 But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Judeans and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. 16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

17 ‘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. 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. 19 And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. 20 The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. 21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved'" (Acts 2:1-21).

At Acts' beginning, as we explored last Sunday, Jesus appears to the apostles just prior to his ascension. In the course of Jesus' last teaching, he promises the apostles "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:5). Today's lesson carries out Jesus' promise. Pentecost reminds us that the apostles gathered in one place as the spirit filled the house where they were. Most Bible readers know the part of our story where "there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind." These apostles "were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." This spectacle drew a crowd.

Luke then continues that this phenomenon of the Holy Spirit befuddled those gathered "because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each." But note this about the miracle of Pentecost: God welcomes folks from all over the Mediterranean world, enabling believers to express various languages—but the languages are recognized languages. God does not empower everyone gathered to hear the same language, that is, to comprehend the Aramaic language and become like just like the apostles. Rather, each of these assembled can hear the gospel in his or her own native tongue and apply the gospel for themselves. Whatever happened—it is a peculiar occurrence, no doubt.

Plainly our story indicates that the Holy Spirit supplies power. Yet, the Holy Spirit pours out the power on all those gathered as one. Consequently, the power is not simply for two or three random individuals. The power of the spirit empowers the whole collection of believers. We all know the truth of the old saying, "Many hands lighten the load." This might mean that it is much easier for six pall bearers to carry a casket than it is for two funeral directors. Together—

as a community of faith we are much stronger—and more effective—when we work in concert. And this being in concert is under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Picture a scenario in our church's Great Hall after a meal. In truth this scenario occurred last Saturday night a week ago at our confirmation banquet. The room needed clearing for Celebration worship the next morning. If two or three people broke down 25 tables and folded 150 chairs, this effort would take a lot of time. Yet, many people pitched in and helped clear the room. It took only a matter of minutes. Congregational power occurs when believers work together for a common good.

As a matter of fact this “shared work” is a principle behind stewardship of a local church. When many people, prompted to generosity by the Holy Spirit, give with generosity, then the church can accomplish substantive ministry. If a congregation relies on only a few “big givers,” then that church effectively compromises its mission outreach. It is no accident that God chose to pour out the Holy Spirit on many. The tongues of fire representing the spirit “rested on each of them.” Many received the Holy Spirit experience and they, as a result, became stewards of that spirit. Together they became strong.

This past week I read a curious fact about bees. As you know bees are vital in pollination of agriculture. In fact, as honey bees gather pollen and nectar for their own survival, they also pollinate crops such as apples, cranberries, melons, and broccoli. Some crops, including blueberries and cherries, are 90% dependent on honey bee pollination; one crop, almonds, depends entirely on the honey bee for pollination at bloom time.

In addition bees demonstrate something about teamwork. On a warm day about half the bees in a hive stay inside beating their wings, while the hive's other half goes out to gather pollen and nectar. The beating wings cause the temperature inside the hive to be about 10 degrees cooler than outside. The colony regulates the temperature in its nest to protect the developing brood. The bees rotate duties and the bees that cool the hive one day are honey gatherers the next (*Bits &*

Pieces, 17 Sept 1992, p. 19-20). Nature offers us many other examples of teamwork including California's redwoods' root systems, ant colonies cooperation, and geese flying in formation as other examples.

We could say that the Pentecost story exhibits a model for what we today call the "team concept." Yet, distinct from human sports or games, God prompts this team-effect in order to equip the community of faith. But what kind of teammates are we to one another? We recall that Jesus as the New Testament tells us is the Christ who is the head of the body (Eph 5:23; Col 1:18). Remember at one time or another in our life when you put your face above a headless frame painted to represent a muscle man, a clown, or even a bathing beauty? Many of us have had our pictures taken this way, and the photos are humorous because the head doesn't fit the body. If we could picture Christ as the head of our local body of believers, would the world laugh at the misfit? Or would the world stand in awe of a human body so closely related to a divine head (thanks for this image goes to Dan Bernard)?

Luke, later in Acts, relates the story of a crowd that brings Jason before the Thessalonian authorities. They accuse Jason with shouts that he, with other believers, "has been turning the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). Fundamentally, this is why God sends the Holy Spirit's power upon us—to turn the world upside down. We do this by simply managing the stewardship households God gives to the church. If a church works as one for the mutual goal of God's realm, then nothing can hinder its effectiveness.

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