

A Passion For The Possible

Pentecost Sunday

June 12, 2011

Acts 2:1-24, 36-43 John 7:37-39 I Corinthians 12:3-13

Dr. Edwin Gray Hurley

Once a teacher took her class of fifth graders to the zoo on a field trip. Many had never been to the zoo and were absolutely fascinated by the exotic wild animals they previously had seen only in pictures, and now were seeing face-to-face.

One little boy, however, had been to the zoo and he seemed bored by the whole thing, and by nature he usually made himself an obnoxious pest. His main interest was in making others – fellow students and teachers alike – feel miserable. The teacher had put up with his misbehavior for too long and generally came to ignore him.

So when all the students got to the lions, they were duly awed before the King of Beasts, all, that is, except this one little pest. Somewhere along the way he had picked up a long stick and now proceeded to try and impress his classmates by attacking the lion – poking the stick through the bars. As if that were not enough, he picked up little rocks and threw them at the lion.

About that time, the lion keeper happened by, and seeing the boy provoking the lion, said sternly, “Stop! Don’t tease the lion!” With that, a voice, which sounded like the teacher’s was heard from the back of the crowd, “Don’t defend the lion! Just turn him loose!”

On Pentecost the Holy Spirit was turned loose, transforming fearful followers of a man the Romans crucified, into bold courageous witnesses of what God did – raising this man from the dead. On Pentecost God was let loose on the world!

God sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to show us what is possible. We generally limit ourselves about what is possible. We also limit God, too. God says, let me show you what can happen when my Spirit takes charge.

Pentecost marks the official birth of the Church. Not that the Spirit was not working before. But on this day a presence and a power came upon confused followers of Jesus that has had ongoing impact. They became bold, courageous witnesses. The only way this change happened, and the only way it continues to happen, is through the Holy Spirit.

Now you know the Holy Spirit is the third part of the being of God, the third person of the Holy Trinity - sometimes called the shy person. You know the Holy Spirit is that part of God who brings to our present awareness, and to our present understanding and to our present motivation the truth which Jesus Christ lived out in a particular time and place. The Holy Spirit acts as a catalyst, like a chemical agent, to kick God's creating and redeeming action into gear in the lives

of women and men. The Holy Spirit is the enabler who makes Jesus Christ to be present in and with us here and now. As Jesus said to his followers before his crucifixion, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth."ⁱ

At Pentecost the Spirit's work among us begins. Manifesting himself as wind and fire, the Holy Spirit comes on an ancient Jewish festival day. Pentecost was originally a celebration of the harvest of wheat. Later it became a celebration of the giving of God's Law to Moses at Sinai. It occurs 50 days after Passover, hence the 50 – "pente." The Holy Spirit comes and invigorates a traditional observance with a fresh gust of wind and warm flames of fire that creates the church, and fills it with a passion for the possible. And that flame has not yet been put out.

I

Since earliest days humans have been on the earth, fire has been a great helper, when controlled, and, a great destroyer, when out of control. With controlled fire people learned to cook their food and warm their homes, ignite an engine and shoot a gun. Out of control, as in Arizona recently, or the west coast most any summer, or in Chicago or London years ago, fire can destroy whole cities and country sides. Essentially fire comes about when oxygen unites in sufficient measure with something else, wood, gas, coal, some other fuel. Fire produces two things; heat and light. Both are needed for us to live on this earth.

Now God's fire, as described in our text, is unique. Long before the Spirit's coming at Pentecost, God came to Moses out in the wilderness in the form of a flame of fire out of a bush. Both heat and light came forth, but the bush was not consumed. An amazing sight that got Moses' attention on a boring day while he was tending his father-in-law's smelly sheep. He saw the fire, he heeded the voice. He answered the call. As the Israelites moved out from Egypt under Moses' leadership, God directed them at night by a flame of fire hovering over the wilderness tabernacle. When the flame moved so did the people. When the flame hovered in the same place, so did they.

Come to the day of Pentecost. Here are all these Jews from round the world come together in Jerusalem to celebrate the anniversary of the giving of this Law to Moses at Mt. Sinai, a traditional Jewish gathering. Among them in the city is the small Jewish band of Jesus' followers. Suddenly, there comes from heaven a great gust of wind that fills the whole house where Peter and the others have gathered. Then, flames as of fire appear and rest upon each of them. We assume, as with Moses in the wilderness, that these flames also do not consume since the believers live to speak another day. And not only live, but they come alive as never before. "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."ⁱⁱⁱ

On this Pentecost Sunday I lift up the Spirit, in the image of a flame, manifesting warm light of a great coming together, a great convergence, a great uniting. Just as fire requires a coming together, a uniting, of oxygen with something else, wood, gasoline, or another combustible material, and a flame is the result, producing heat and light, so the Church, in coming together, different parts of the body become a flame of radiant heat and slowly light. The Church becomes

a people united, filled with purpose and power, hope and confidence beyond our own human abilities. When the Spirit gets hold. We become more together than the sum of our parts. We become the living moving organic body of Christ.

II

I am calling for us, on this Pentecost to demonstrate a renewed willingness to allow God's Spirit to manifest God's way through us. Allow God to control us, and do not try it the other, and utterly ineffective, way around. We hear lots about younger generation's habits, emerging from our technology-saturated Internet-connected I-Pod, I-Pad wired culture. These younger people are said to be anti-institution and anti-organization. Implication for the church is that we cannot cut it acting like just another institution or just another organization. This has never been a good way for Christians to act anyway. Those ways are not our essential nature.

Our essential nature is organic as a living, inter-connected heart throbbing being. Friends, there is tremendous spiritual hunger afoot, for a church that is alive and connected and real. We can be that community. We must be that community.

This is precisely what the Spirit comes to bring at Pentecost - not another organization. The Jews already had an organization. It was called the Synagogue. The Romans already had an organization. It was called the Empire. The fledgling believers did not need a church to be born that went out and acted like either of those organizations. But they very much needed, and we very much need, a community that is living, organic, serving and caring a conduit for us to the living God. A Spirit-filled, and Spirit-led Church where, as Jesus said just before his ascension, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."ⁱⁱⁱ

Across the world right now we are seeing a great yearning to transcend old nationalisms. The "Arab Spring" in the Middle East bringing down tyrants gives us hope, as well as concern. Can these new more open democratic societies replace these top-down closed oligarchies? Younger generations connecting worldwide on Facebook, Twitter, and internet, are not interested in the nation-state divisions as older generations have been. They are interested in our common humanity. Pablo Casals once said, "To love one's country is a splendid thing, but why should love stop at the border?" Look at the advertisements geared at younger people. What we see is a multi-cultural mix of folks, various races represented in one group, everyone coming together to convey that these jeans, this perfume, is for all. Old artificial walls are coming down among young people. Pentecost reflects that walls coming down, people coming together for a more worthy end – God's kingdom expansion among us – beginning right here.

Pentecost shows us that God is coming now, not in a narrow limited fashion, for one race or class or people, but for all. There was a universalizing expansion going on that day, as through the Spirit people from many nations who had arrived to observe the Jewish festival hear the good news about God sending Jesus as savior of the world each hearing in their own languages. "Even Cretans and Arabs!" That's how Eugene Peterson highlights it in his fine paraphrase *The Message*. The Gospel is for "even Cretans and Arabs!" Suddenly the mighty acts of God are

not limited to a particular race or class, but are accessible to all. Cretans and Arabs, Buddhists and Muslims, rednecks and upper crust socialites - Auburn tiger fans and Alabama crimson tide fans – all coming together – and even liking each other!

III

Now this does not wipe out diversity and distinction. There was in the early church, and there continues to this day, a great diversity in the Church. Just take styles of music, from a Bach cantata to “Shine Jesus Shine.” Just take congregational participation, from an "amen, preach it, brother" response in a black Baptist congregation, like comes from Living Stones Temple across the street, to a quiet, say your "amen" only when it is printed in the bulletin and never after a hymn, in a button-down Presbyterian congregation. It is O.K. for us to relax a bit on that, by the way. We need a few unscheduled “amen’s.” We need to pray for God to break in and do something great among us that's not in the bulletin. What was once limited, God's Spirit, is now poured out on all, so that young people will see visions and old people will dream dreams. And “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”^{iv}

IV

The Spirit descends on us to show us just what is possible. We are in what might be called both the "best of times" and "the worst of times" for the Church. Mainline institutional churches are struggling across the board.

Mainline Protestant Christianity in the United States is in massive decline, and at the point of either death or real transformation. Much has been researched and written about this decline. Yet after all of this is set forth, as Clifton Kirkpatrick, our former PCUSA Stated Clerk, and William Hopper say in a book on our denominational decline,

“The sometimes unstated fact is that the Presbyterian Church has not changed its historic pattern of not being very vocal about telling others about Christ. Unless we change this reality we will continue to decline and to be divided.”

Brothers and sisters, we must let the Spirit take control of us and of this congregation – South Highland Presbyterian Church – to an even greater degree, and spread the word about Jesus Christ and the difference he makes in our lives, and how we find him and grow in him here in this church.

George Hunter – Professor of Mission and Evangelism at Asbury Seminary in Kentucky, says, we must become an Apostolic Church – that is a missional sent community going out – as was the First Century Church. He identifies eleven distinctive features of the Apostolic Congregation we need to become.

- 1 Apostolic Congregations seek to root believers and seekers in Scripture, for after all, the Bible is the content of the faith.
- 2 Apostolic Congregations are disciplined in their prayer life.
- 3 In Apostolic Congregations members believe great things about God and expect great things from God. Everyone in the Church has a prayer partner and there is an overt emphasis throughout the life of the congregation on prayer.
- 4 Apostolic Congregations have a passion and compassion for lost unchurched people. The underlying passion in every church should be that “lost people matter to God.”
- 5 Apostolic Congregations obey the Great Commission. They accept it as a privilege, not as a duty to be performed. The main business of the Church is to make faith possible for the unreached. Outreach is not one of many ministries of the church; it is THE ministry of the Church.
- 6 Apostolic Congregations have a vision for what men and women disciples can become.
- 7 Apostolic Congregations are relevant, adapting to the language, music and style of the people they are trying to reach.
- 8 Apostolic Congregations seek to involve everyone – members and seekers – in a small group where they can be nourished spiritually.
- 9 Apostolic Congregations seek the involvement of all laity in ministries where they are gifted. They seek to discern the gifts of the people and let them express these gifts through involvement in the church ministry.
- 10 Apostolic Congregations care about pastoral care and seek persons who are gifted in shepherding care.
- 11 Apostolic Congregations have many ministries that focus on the unchurched who have not found Christ.

In Short, Apostolic Churches are on Fire!

Blaise Pascal was one upon whom the Spirit came in a surprising way beyond his individual control. A deeply spiritual man, this leading French mathematician had an amazing experience with God one night, and he wrote a few sentences about it, sentences, which inspired him for the rest of his life. He wrote down these sentences told no one about them, but sewed the paper into the lining of the jacket he always wore. They were discovered only after his death. He wrote, “The year of grace 1654, Monday 23, November. From about half past ten in the evening until half past midnight. Fire. ‘God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,’ not of philosopher and

scholars. Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace, God of Jesus Christ. My God and you God. “Thy God shall be my God.”^v

Countless people like Pascal have experienced God. I have experienced God in intensely personal ways on a few occasions. Many in groups from this congregation will experience God personally this summer - some already have in Kenya, in Mexico - at Montreat – a Great Escape – at vacation bible school. The point is not to go out seeking an esoteric experience. The point is simply to allow God to lead you, work in you, and you pay attention when experiences come. “Let anyone who is thirsty come to Jesus Christ, let anyone who believes in Jesus Christ come and drink – living water.”

G.K. Chesterton said, "The world does not lack for wonders, only for a sense of wonder." God's Holy Spirit is here, upon us, among us, to open us, to empower us, to inflame us with passion for the possible, to awaken us to a sense of wonder, to tell others the story of Jesus and his love. God intends to pull together all our diverse parts, and unite us in one strong solid witness to show forth his grace and glory. And God will do it! Watch out, the lion is on the loose!

ⁱ John 16:12,13

ⁱⁱ Acts 2:3,4

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts I :8

^{iv} Acts 2:21

^v Blaise Pascal, "The Memorial," in *Pensees*, p.309