

Like a Mighty Wind
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
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Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Acts 2:1-21

Happy Birthday, Church! Today is "Pentecost" which in the Christian tradition marks the beginning of the faith community brought to life by the living presence of Jesus Christ. The Church didn't just appear out of nothing however. Pentecost was celebrated in Jewish tradition as the day when God gave Israel the gift of Torah, the Law, a powerful bond uniting them in sacred covenant. Interestingly, Jewish interpreters taught that Torah came to Moses on Mt. Sinai in the form of seventy voices or languages, thereby enabling the seventy then-known races of the world to receive it, each in its own language. This is significant, because the birthday of the church is likewise described by the divine gift of universal understanding. The first witnesses to this miracle – an incredibly diverse crowd – all heard the apostles' proclamation in their own native languages. The Judeo-Christian religious tradition at its heart is the faith of a people, not primarily a private spirituality.

When my son was younger, on each birthday we would mark his height on a closet wall in our home. It was always fun to see a year's worth of growth that went largely unnoticed day to day. What would we observe, if we measured the church on this, its birthday? How have we grown? Do we still share a common language that enables us to be effective in mission? Will 7-month-old Paige, who will be/was baptized this morning hear the good news in ways she will be able to understand? Is the contemporary church heir to the fired-up, spirit-filled community gathered in Jerusalem so long ago? Listen for God's word to the church today in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, in the second chapter at the first verse. [Acts 2:1-21]

The rush of a mighty wind...
Dancing tongues of fiery flames....
Visions of dreams and blood and smoky mist....
Men and women and sons and daughters, slaves and free, of every land
and tribe....

...the church's baring cry was prompted by the Spirit of God, and words aren't really adequate to convey the depth of its power. Consider the consequences: a small, exclusive group of friends who shared the common experience of following Jesus became a universal, diverse community of embodying Jesus in every time and place. The band of brothers and sisters who gathered behind locked doors felt them blown open so that the whole world might come in. People separated by human-imposed dividing lines of language, color, creed were united, much to their amazement. Their eyes had seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!

But here we are, two thousand years later, and the bloom is off the rose. Too often we slam shut the open door. We rarely dream dreams and see visions because we have settled for "the way things are." Besides, how would we pay for them? The Church of Jesus Christ has been weakened by its division, paralyzed by its fears, and pushed to the edges of society. The Church at times seems a pale shadow of itself in those heady early days when its followers were so exuberant they were accused of public drunkenness.

Another of my family's birthday rituals is for the birthday celebrant to declare something she or he is going to do in the unfolding year: some goal to pursue, some new skill to learn—as a way of making the most of the time we have been given. What would our church's birthday declaration be? Perhaps we would all respond to that proposal differently (which is another reason why I love you Fairmounters so much!), but I suggest that our birthday reflection move us to revival, a recovery of that holy, animating Spirit of God that first brought us to life.

...a breath of fresh air...a warm wind that transforms the church so it is less the "frozen chosen" and more the way our friend and elder Judy Forward described it as "the thawed and flawed." I love that expression because it points to two truths about the church, and about HOW we "get the Spirit." First, it's something done to us; in this case, it is God who supplies the power to warm and illuminate, to "light a fire under us" so that faith is kindled and we are filled with the Spirit of joy and peace, the Spirit of forgiveness and patience, the Spirit of truth. Only God can take the frozen and with exquisite grace, melt us into love. Some time ago, one of the pew offering envelopes ended up in the offering plate with a note that circled the word "enthusiasm" and then added, "We're a church; wouldn't a better word be "commitment" or "faith?" While I agree with the note writer that those things are important too, I can't help notice that the word "enthusiasm" is derived from Greek roots meaning "filled with God." Friends, isn't it time we are renewed by being filled with divine presence and power?

Because there's that other word in Judy's description: "flawed." Not a single one of us lives up to our identity as beloved children of God, and as members of Christ's body, the Church. We're sometimes petty; sometimes forgetful; often so busy other things take precedence over faith; we gossip; we revel in our righteousness; we exclude those we deem "cretans"—persons we regard as unacceptable in some way. After all, the church would be perfect....except for the people. *But it is precisely to this flawed human community that the Spirit comes and fills with all the fullness of God.* This imperfect people is greater even than the sum of its individual members, when together we receive the Holy Spirit; when we let that mighty wind blow in us, and through us, and all around us with divine breath.

We're coming on to summer, and traditionally this is a time when people "take a vacation from church." I urge you not to do that: not, by the way, because I am anti-vacation. We all need time to relax, sleep in, find the center we have lost amid impossibly busy lives. All of your pastoral staff will be gone some this summer—and that is good. No, I am asking you not to take a vacation from WORSHIP. Partly because we have a dazzling line-up of topics in the You Asked for It sermon series. But even more, because the Spirit of God works through the community when it gathers. Barriers have a funny way of coming down; seemingly impossible tasks are undertaken with anticipation; hope is restored; old men dream dreams and little children see visions; and amid so much evidence to the contrary, our eyes shall see the glory of the coming of the Lord.

The seeker entered a spacious store in which the gifts of God were kept, and behind the counter was an angel. The seeker made known her request to the angel: "I have run out of the fruits of the Spirit; I need to load up." When the angel seemed about to refuse, the seeker angrily burst out, "In place of war, injustice, lying, hate, tyranny, I want love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, integrity. Without these I shall be lost." But the angel replied, "We do not stock fruits. We only keep seed."

Friends, the fruits of the Spirit are given to us mostly in embryonic form: seeds that must be planted and nurtured by the church community. Our congregation's new logo portrays the front door and arched window facing Fairmount –and it is wide open. An open door: to greet the stranger, to offer hospitality within our walls, to love the flawed human beings we all are. An open door that says, "welcome home." But let us not forget that it is also a door that is opened outward; that bids our members leave the security of the sanctuary and go into the wild world, the threatening, hurting, risky places of need.

But we never go alone. The good news of Pentecost assures us that God is alive and active. With us as creative fire, as transforming wind, as a holy purpose that awakens us to life, the Spirit fills us with power from the very heart of God. So let us plant seeds that will yield a rich harvest of grace and goodness until that great and glorious day when all the world shall be saved.

NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO DO FAR MORE ABUNDANTLY THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER.
AMEN.

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