Disorganized Religion
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
Pentecost June 4, 2006
Text: Act 2:1-20

LOUISE: When someone tells me he doesn't want to come to church because he doesn't think much of organized religion, I smile and invite him to Fairmount anyway, because we're not very organized! Take today for example: there's waaaaaay too much going on for one service. We've got communion, third grade Bible presentation, recognition of our church school teachers, and we're commissioning participants leaving this Saturday to help with hurricane Katrina rebuilding in Mississippi. Half of the congregation is outside making final preparations for the annual Strawberry Festival which follows worship. Not to mention it's PENTECOST, one of the church's great festival Sundays. For crying out loud! Who let this happen?

DICK[from lectern]: Well, Louise, I think we know who is in charge of worship.

LOUISE: You mean Bob Moncrief, Minister of music?

DICK: Uh, well, no—I was thinking of …. YOU.

LOUISE: Well, this is completely over the top. Worship is out of control. I thought we had prepared better than this; thought things through; planned ahead. But this….[*hitting the bulletin]…*this defies description! We've got to figure out how to rein it in, make it a little more manageable. At least for next year. Something's gotta give. Hmmmmm….maybe 3rd grade Bibles…..

HEATHER [*on wireless, standing up from out of the congregation and coming to the lectern]:* Watch it, Pastor Louise!

Don't even think about messing with the 3rd grade Bible presentation. The children always look forward to receiving their first very-own Bibles. And they'll be learning in Sunday church school how to use them and what wonderful words of truth and guidance they contain.

LOUISE: Of course! I meant to say that.

HEATHER: Not to mention the fact that children are an important part of the congregation. Presenting their Bibles during worship tells them more powerfully than words that they matter to us. We are committed to making good on the promises we make at every baptism: that we ALL will take responsibility for nurturing their young faith.

LOUISE: I'm glad our children have such a strong advocate in you, Heather! I love the children's participation in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, as they share in the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving. It really feels like "communion" with the whole church! And it IS great looking out on a congregation that includes children in worship!

HEATHER: And maybe it helps keep the sermons shorter!

LOUISE: Ahem! Yes, well maybe. But perhaps you can explain the reason for recognizing sixth graders. That took approximately 7 minutes .

HEATHER: It's important to celebrate times of transition. These sixth graders have been a vital part of children's ministry, and now they are moving into middle school and are ready for a whole new set of learning and discoveries. Seeing them helps remind us to cheer them on, pray for them, and support their families in the challenges of parenting adolescents.

KAREN: [*on wireless, standing from congregation and walking up to the lectern also]* Well I hope no one imagines that sixth graders "graduate" from church school! In some ways, they're coming into the most exciting time of their church experience as young people. Fairmount's Youth Ministry offers middle school and high school-aged young people a well-rounded program of faith exploration, fellowship and fun, and service to this and the wider community. I hope to see all of our sixth graders participating in the Fall in the "NRG" youth fellowship.

LOUISE: Energy? Energy? I know they have a lot, but what does that mean?

KAREN: NRG! [Brief Description]

LOUISE: Thanks Karen! But now I'm wondering about the commissioning of the participants on the mission trip. These young people and adults are going to Mississippi to assist with Hurricane Recovery, I believe?

KAREN: Yes! And there's been such a demand –both for willing workers AND opportunities to serve, that we invited the Church of the Covenant to join us. So we've got 54 people going. We'll be [Brief description]

LOUISE: That's amazing! What an unforgettable experience that will be! And what invaluable service you'll be rendering to a devastated community! In other words, it's going to be the toughest job you'll ever love! Well, we'll be sure to pray for you. But, now we really need to get back to the sermon.

MISSY: [*coming to lectern from chancel]* Uh, Louise, before you get back to the sermon, I just want to remind you of another prayer concern. Don't forget that the General Assembly of our Church is meeting in two weeks, and has a very full agenda of decision-making for the entire Presbyterian Church.

LOUISE: Yes, yes, I know, Missy, but we really do need to get on with the service.

MISSY: I know, I know, but the congregation needs to start praying NOW that the General Assembly will be divinely inspired to address some of the issues coming before it: ordination standards and homosexuality, divestment and investment in Israel, the report of the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church, affectionately referred to as "PUP".

LOUISE: Pup??? As in small dog?

MISSY: Peace….Unity…..Purity……..three critical characteristics of an effective, faithful church. There is bound to be conflict and division over the various recommendations and actions, so let's commit ourselves to praying for commissioners and staff.

DICK: [*standing at lectern] ….*which reminds me that Fairmount is not only part of the connectional Presbyterian Church, but also an ecumenical AND interfaith partner in the Cleveland community. Your dialog sermon next week with Rabbi Alan Lettovsky will explore ways interfaith relationships are collaborating on peacemaking initiatives in the Middle East….and in our own back yard.

LOUISE: You can say that again!

DICK: Your dialog sermon next week with Rabbi Alan Lettovsky will…….

LOUISE: Okay, okay, I think they got it. Now, can we get on with the sermon?

DICK: Well I did want everyone to know about the guided tour for Fairmounters of the special "Cradle of Christianity" exhibit at the Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage. It's an unbelievable opportunity to view and learn about antiquities from the Holy Land, including an actual fragment of a Dead Sea Scroll. [MISSY, HEATHER, KAREN ENCIRCLE HIM, PUT HANDS ON HIS SHOULDERS, AND START TO PULL HIM AWAY] Read all about it in the bulletin!!!!!! Okay, okay, I'm sitting down!

LOUISE: Whew! Now where was I? All this celebrating and thanking and commissioning and praying and calling! I need to get control of this service. Right now. Okay, people! Listen for God's word in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the second chapter at the first verse.

[ACTS 2:1-20]

The festival of Pentecost celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit into the community of believers, birthing the Church and animating the Body of Christ. The historical account of this event struggles to express its mystery and miracle, and even eyewitnesses first conclude that the group is drunk. God's ways frequently confound human reasoning. The wind blows where it wills, Jesus said, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with the Spirit of God…its imaginative impulse, eternal presence and boundless love are so far beyond our comprehension….

……and our control apparently. God is at work within this church, in ways that frequently surprise us. Our children witness to God's unconditional love….our young men and young women take our breath away with their thoughtful questions and generous giving. Perfectly normal—and very busy—individuals dedicate time and talent to church school teaching and shepherding. Others set up tables and slice boxes and boxes of strawberries and book the Rocket Car so we can enjoy an afternoon of neighborhood fun and fellowship. The wider Presbyterian church—for all its faults and missteps—enlarges our perspective, and keeps us from

self-absorption. The Spirit of the living God is not the sole possession of the Christian Church either. No religion however organized, however decent and orderly, can contain the Holy One who is always beyond our understanding and control. Yet this divine wind that blows away the certainty and smugness in us, can also rekindle passionate faith. Your session has recently approved a framework of plans and actions we believe will set us on a path towards numerical and spiritual growth. You'll be hearing much more about this in the weeks ahead as we clarify specific tasks and responsibilities. And you'll be invited to find your place of spiritual renewal. But I want you to know that the foundational principle underlying the enterprise is to find out where God is calling our church to serve…by identifying where the Spirit is moving, where we experience energy and connection. We will do our part by assessing needs, building relationships, and developing strategies. But finally it will be God's work. God will pour out the Spirit upon us, young and old, men and women.

And friends, all we have to do is simply receive it, let it fill us, and go with it. Let the Spirit lead us, let it take us body and soul-- more gladly into love, more deeply into purpose, and more fully into life. Today and tomorrow and always. Alleluia! Amen.

TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

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