



SERMONS THAT WORK

Day of Pentecost Year C

Astounding

[RCL]: Acts 2:1-21 or Genesis 11:1-9; Psalm 104:25-35, 37; Romans 8:14-17 or Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17, (25-27)

In our lesson about Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the first disciples and they started to speak in different languages, the crowd, we are told, responds in interesting ways: they were confused, they were astounded, they were amazed, they were bewildered, and some said the disciples must have been drunk. I wonder – when we come to church, gathered in the name of the triune God, reconciled in Christ, united in the Spirit, listening for God’s word – whether these are the types of responses we are really looking for. I suspect, if we are honest with ourselves, we are actually looking for the opposite. We are good Episcopalians, after all, mainstream Christians, and we come to church wanting our preachers and teachers to explain things. You know, we read these strange and wonderful stories in scripture and we do these peculiar things in church, and their job, we may think, is to explain them in a way that makes sense. However, I worry, if we are being honest, that what we end up trying to do is to explain *away* the strangeness, the wonder, and the peculiarity of our faith. We are probably more comfortable with a response that is like, “Okay, that makes a certain amount of sense,” rather than “Okay, that was confusing and bewildering,” or, “Isn’t it a little early for the preacher to be drinking?” In trying to make things understandable, we may end up stripping the power from these stories.

For example, in a key passage about the gift of the Holy Spirit in John’s Gospel, Jesus breathes on the disciples and says to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:22-23). Now, in our desire to have things explained, we might prefer to hear something like, “You know, Jesus was on to something with this teaching about forgiveness. Of course, Jesus was a peasant from 1st century Galilee and he didn’t have the benefit of a seminary education, so he didn’t really have a chance to develop his ideas about forgiveness more fully. But if he could have taken a few courses on pastoral care and counseling, I’m sure he would have come to see that in the power to forgive, we find the strength to overcome our resentment and anger, and to find healing for ourselves in laying down the burden of unforgiveness.”

Now, even though a lot of what was just said about forgiveness is true, that was not what Jesus was talking about. Rather, Jesus was making a claim that was a whole lot more astounding, bewildering and even

shocking. Most Jews at the time would have said that there is one (and only one) person who can forgive sins and that person is God. When Jesus had the temerity to say that people's sins were forgiven, the religious authorities of his day accused him of blasphemy. Who but God can forgive sins? So, when Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit upon his disciples and tells them that they have the authority to forgive sins, we are moving into really scandalous territory. The response to Jesus' claim should not be a polite, "Thank you for teaching us a way we can achieve emotional healing." Rather, it should be the almost scandalized astonishment we feel at God's prerogative to forgive being handed over to sinful human beings. Jesus' breathing forth the Spirit upon his disciples is not a nice object lesson used to illustrate a bit of self-help. It is the astonishing gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples that transforms them into participants in God's mission to forgive the sins of the world.

And yet, in our desire to have things explained, we can even domesticate our Pentecost story from Acts about the Holy Spirit descending with a loud noise like a violent wind and appearing on the disciples like tongues of fire. From our account, the coming of the Holy Spirit was a noisy and visibly stunning event, which turned a bunch of frightened disciples into bold proclaimers of the Gospel. But for many of us, we are much more comfortable confining the Holy Spirit to deep, interior experiences, oftentimes occasioned by long walks along the beach, or in the mountains, preferably at sunset. Somehow in the quiet, in the solitude, in nature, in the sunset, the Holy Spirit speaks to something deep within our souls, in a way that seems to bring some comfort. And the response we get to these musings on the Holy Spirit is usually pretty much the same. *Okay, that was kind of nice. I guess the Holy Spirit is the nice part of the Trinity.* The problem is that the Holy Spirit we meet in Pentecost blows the doors off the building, lights up the room like a fireworks display, and has the disciples speaking such strange and wondrous things that the crowd is bewildered and astounded. When people encounter the disciples after the Pentecost, they don't politely shake their hands and thank them for the lovely service, but rather shake their heads and wonder if these people are drunk.

Then Peter gets up and he gives a speech that doesn't try to explain away the strange and wondrous things that were happening. And he gives what must be one of the all-time great opening lines in a sermon. He basically says, "Okay, I want to clear away some confusion right up front. We are not drunk. For heaven's sake, it's only 9 o'clock in the morning and the bars aren't even open yet." And then Peter goes on to talk about the Spirit turning the world upside-down. It is strange and wondrous and somewhat scary. It is about the power of the Holy Spirit let loose in the world, and a people filled with the Spirit of God who have been empowered to change the world.

Pentecost is traditionally a feast day on which we baptize new members into Christ's Church. And we have gotten so good at explaining things, we can even talk about baptism in a way that will evoke a rather half-hearted, *hmm that's interesting*. As trained professionals, we can suck the life out of almost anything. So about baptism, we might say something like, "All cultures and religions have life-cycles rituals which anthropologists tell us play an important role in socializing members in the norms and values of the community. Baptism is the way we are incorporated into the life of the church and take on the beliefs and practices of the Christian faith." True enough, but kind of a yawn. But actually, when the priest pours

water on a child's head, we are making the astounding claim that the triune God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, is claiming this child as God's beloved daughter, uniting her to Christ in his death and resurrection, filling her with the Holy Spirit and sending her out with gifts that can turn the world upside-down. God in baptism is pouring out the Holy Spirit upon adults and children in order to resist evil, to proclaim the Good News of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and peace among all people. It's crazy talk, but in baptism and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, God uses frail, fragile, fallible human beings to forgive sins and to bring about his kingdom of justice and mercy and peace. This is strange and wondrous, confusing and bewildering, and much more interesting than a little me-time with the Holy Spirit.

Donald Juel tells a story that gets at this strange and wondrous good news. Juel was a New Testament scholar who taught at Princeton before he passed away. He was also a faithful churchman who taught regularly at his local Lutheran parish. One time he was teaching a confirmation class, and he was talking about the story of Jesus' baptism when the heavens were torn open and the Spirit descended upon Jesus. Being a biblical scholar, he explained the meaning of the Greek term for the heavens being torn open and all the different places in the Gospels where this Greek word was used. One of the teenagers interrupted and said to get to the point. The point, Juel said, was that "When Jesus was baptized the heavens that separate us from God were ripped open so that now we can get to God. Because of Jesus, we have access to God—we can get close to him." However, the young man interrupted again and said, "That ain't what it means." "What?" Professor Juel said, startled. The teenager repeated, "I said that ain't what that means. It means that the heavens were ripped open so that now God can get at us anytime he wants. Ain't nobody safe now!"

At Jesus' baptism, the heavens were torn asunder and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled the upper room with the roar of a great wind, landed on the disciples in tongues of fire, and sent them out into the world to proclaim the good news. In John's Gospel, the risen Lord breathed the Holy Spirit upon his disciples and gave them God's power to forgive sins. Now God can get at us anytime God wants. Ain't nobody safe now.

And, in case anybody is wondering, we are not drunk!