



A SERMON BY THE REV. DR. CHRIS KEATING

“What does this mean?”
Pentecost Sunday, June 9, 2019
Acts 2:1-21

As the Spirit lands on the community of faith, it shapes and reforms it according to the promise of God.

One Pentecost morning when I was a child, I remember thinking, “The Holy Ghost better not show up in this church today.” I was sitting in the pew of our small Presbyterian church, watching the tensions in the church. This was the 1970s, and new waves of spiritual enthusiasm were ranging across mainline denominations in Southern California like brush fires. For some time, there had been divisions in the church between traditional Presbyterians and a group of other members who identified as being “spirit-filled Christians.” My parents were part of the traditional tribe.

They wanted little to do with people waving their arms and speaking in tongues. It wasn’t that my parents and their friends were opposed to the Holy Spirit. They just preferred if the Spirit would show up in moderate doses, sort of like prescription medicine, measured out one small sliver at a time.

The tensions had been building and erupted like a volcano one Sunday when one of the Spirit-enthusiasts stood on the pews and began waving his arms and speaking in tongues while we were singing “It Only Takes a Spark to Get A Fire Going.” I believe my mother was ready to hand him a match. For the rest of her life you could get her going by merely humming that song.

The tension only increased as Pentecost approached. You could feel it in the air: each side eyed each other. The

traditionalists figured there would be a coup, and the Spirit-filled group believed the other side had been secretly planning on standing up and singing “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” should anyone start speaking in tongues.

The underlying conflict left the pastor feeling queasy. All he wanted to do was to get everyone to wear red on Pentecost. He hadn’t signed up for this!

“The Holy Spirit had better not show up,” many had thought to themselves, or “there’s going to be trouble around these parts.”

When the day of Pentecost had come, we were all together in one place. The pastor stood to read Acts 2, when suddenly...nothing happened.

No violent wind. No tornado blast, no divided tongues, no fire, or speaking in strange languages. It was pretty much an ordinary Sunday. Mrs. Mesa played the prelude on the organ, the choir rose to sing “Breathe on My Breath of God,” while the congregation held its breath, the pastor preached and prayed and the offering was received and everyone went home...pretty much as if nothing had happened.

It was Pentecost, but nothing happened.

In truth, that Pentecost was no different from many Christians have

experienced over the centuries. The truth of the matter is that neither group – neither the traditionalists or the Spirit-filled ones – understood how the Spirit wanted to work in their midst. Neither side understood that Pentecost is not some sort of American Ninja Warrior competition to see how has the most spiritual muscle. Neither side understood that whatever else Pentecost may be, it is not a day for taking sides.

And all of us stood around wondering, “What does this mean?”

We pray, “Come, creator Spirit,” but I am not sure we are significantly aware of what we are asking. In the HBO miniseries, “Chernobyl,” the story of the Soviet nuclear power plant that melted down in 1986, it becomes apparent that the truth of the accident was that no one – neither the Soviet government nor the people operating the power plant – understood the untamed power contained within a nuclear reactor.

And the same is true for us. We have domesticated Pentecost, turning it into a day when we dig out something red to wear to church, yet forget that we are playing with a nuclear reactor billions of times more powerful than anything the world has ever created.

We pray, “Come, creator Spirit,” but more often than not, we are standing on the sidelines with that crowd from Jerusalem, saying to ourselves, “What do these things mean?”

I believe that it was not until I was called to Woodlawn Chapel that I began to gain even the slightest understanding of

Pentecost. This church, of course, has a history with Pentecost. This is our day! It was on Pentecost Sunday, June 3, 1990 that several hundred brave souls gathered under a tent on our lawn for the chartering of Woodlawn Chapel by the Presbytery. We did not have Parthians and Medes and Elamites, or residents of Mesopotamia. But we did have 27 baptisms. We were lacking Cappadocians and Judeans, but there were transplants from St. Mark Presbyterian and Bonhomme Presbyterian Churches. There were not any Wildwood residents present that day because Wildwood itself had yet to be incorporated as a city. But there were folks from Winding Trails subdivision, from Westglen Farms and Timber Ridge Estates, and a few all the way from across the street at Pointe Clayton. There was a young pastor named Lee Nichols and his wife, Lynn, and people named Bob and Joan, and Linda and Carol and John, Becky and Mary and Brad, Kevin and Kathy and others.

The story of this church is bound close to the story of Pentecost, and so it is important to remember that first and foremost Pentecost is a celebration. Pentecost, of course, was the Jewish feast of Weeks, or Shavuot. It comes 50 days after Passover and marked the harvest of spring wheat. Grain offerings were important to the original Shavuot celebrations, as were the offerings of first fruits or Bikkurim. Wheat, barley, grapes, figs and pomegranates, olives were all harvested and placed in baskets. A grand parade into Jerusalem would follow. It is a time of celebrating God’s faithfulness.

We know little about harvesting figs, but we do know something about eating

cake. And we know a little about barbecue as well, as most of our Pentecost celebrations have included not just the flames of the Spirit but the flames of the grill.

There was the time when several men of the church had been tasked with grilling the Pentecost offering. They skipped worship and got the grill warm---so that just as I was beginning the sermon you could see flames coming out of the rear windows of the sanctuary.

But I think that when the history of this church is written, perhaps the defining account of our celebrations will be last week's picnic celebrating the grand opening of the pavilion. The food was great, but the games were incredible. I do not believe there is a better way of defining the movement of the Holy Spirit in this congregation than the picture of the Rev. Dr. Robert McClelland, author, painter, pastor, theologian trying to wiggle an Oreo from his eye to his nose. Certainly, the video of that must surely be submitted to the Presbyterian Historical Society!

I have shown that video wherever I have gone this week, and the answer has always been, "What is that man doing?"

Some would say, "He is filled with new wine!" Some would look at the character of our celebrations and sneer. "Don't they understand how serious these times are?" "Don't those people know what's at stake in our world today?" How can they be so silly? What do these things mean?

Each time I hear the roll call of nations from Acts 2, I think of the first time my parents took my to Grand Central Station in New York City. In that great hall, as people rushed from trains to taxis, from subways to commuter trains, all my little five year old ears could hear was the booming, disembodied voice of the train announcer. The announcer's voice rattled across the marble, his voice barely understandable. "What does this mean?"

It means God is creating a new community. The Spirit makes an astounding entrance, breaking through doors and windows, blowing new-found power and purpose into the lives of the Apostles. No longer were they to be shuttered up in an upper room. Instead, the Spirit blows open the windows of the room so that the entire world can hear what they have to say.

What does this mean? These new mighty works of God bring comfort and peace, creating community among diversity – not just Parthians and Medes, but straight and gay, liberal and conservative, rich and poor. Despite all the obstacles and divisions in our world, the Spirit comes, blowing where it wills, with power and full assurance.

What does this mean? It means that we celebrate, wiggling Oreos down our faces, laughing in spite of ourselves. It means that we—the brokenhearted, weary, run down people of God are the very ones God is using to bring hope to this world.

What do these things mean? It means the Spirit has come, and it has come just in the nick of time. Amen.

