



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

Asheville, North Carolina

May 23, 2021

Sermon: "Faith-Full"

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Acts 2:1-21

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When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 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.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs--in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

~

“So, there’s this church. . . .
It has an extraordinary community garden.
It has a heart for justice and equity and inclusion work.
It has people of all ages, families of all varieties.
It appreciates strong preaching and engaging classes.
It is down to earth, and vibrant, and radical, and experimental, and fun.
And It just so happens that this church is looking for an Associate Pastor.
Why not talk with them, Sam?”

This is what my home-church pastor said to me one afternoon over coffee nearly 6 and a half years ago.

“Sounds amazing,” I said. “Where is it?”

“Asheville.”

“Where is Asheville?” I ask. “Cuz if it’s much further than the Bronx, I am not interested in a two-hour subway commute.”

“It’s in North Carolina.”

“No, no, no,” I say, downing my last bit of coffee. “I don’t leave New York, but thanks anyway.” I get up. He stays seated.

“Why are you trying to limit God’s Spirit?” he asks.

I fall back into my chair and breathe in his question once more...

“Why are you trying to limit God’s Spirit?”

~

In the beginning, God’s *ruah*, God’s Holy Spirit enters into chaos and suddenly creation, order, new life and possibility are born.

On Pentecost Day, it is that same Spirit that bursts into the room, causing chaos and bewilderment and the beginning of the Church as we know it.

Yes, Scripture sings out over and over again that God’s Spirit is untamable, immeasurable, unpredictable. It is busy, and on the move, alive and at work: troublemaking and transforming...*ready or not.*

~

The disciples and those gathered that day - had no idea what was coming to them. There they were, assembled in one place when suddenly God’s Spirit rushes in like a wild, uninvited guest.

A violent wind rings out.
Tongues of fire come down.
The Holy Spirit fills up each one.

And then, most unexpectedly, a flurry of different languages.
The people appear strange, as if drunk.
The Spirit takes over - and there's nothing anyone can do to stop it, to contain it.

Each is miraculously empowered to speak in a new way.
Each is amazed by their neighbor's ability to communicate and understand.
Each is able to connect across boundaries and backgrounds.
Each is a living fulfillment of what has been promised by the prophets.

Through this miraculous and unannounced Spirit,
all the people are able to share and prophesy,
and trust in one another like never before.

At this moment, God initiates Pentecost.
Each soul is filled with the faith to speak out - and step out - towards each other.

~

“Why are you trying to limit God's Spirit?”

New York City is a long way from Asheville, North Carolina.
But my love for you came almost as swiftly and unexpectedly, as that Pentecost Spirit rushing in.
The first time I hugged the members of my Associate Pastor Nominating Committee, it felt like I was reuniting with old friends. *How is this possible? I thought.*

GCPC wasn't in my plans. My partner, Matt and I didn't know anyone here.
I tried to make excuses as to why I could not follow this call, but the Spirit was already speaking loud and clear: wherever GCPC was, wherever you were, I knew I needed to be.
All I had to do was muster the courage to speak that truth aloud, and move forward in faith.

~

I remember the first sermon I ever preached in our sanctuary; in it, I spoke about how I kept getting lost in these glorious mountains because the streets were not on a grid.

I remember at my very first session meeting some of you educated me on the real meaning behind the phrase “Bless your heart.” *Wait...it's not a compliment?*

I remember the first night at the Montreat Youth Conference, walking alone in the dark to our house, after just being told that the area was full of bears. And I ended up calling the youth to come walk alongside me – out of fear that I might not make it to the house alive.

I also remember those more revealing firsts:
cherished invitations to your homes and hospital rooms, open conversations about your fears and your dreams, your doubts and your proudest moments. Sweet, illuminating introductions to the pictures on your walls, to the soulful youth and children standing in your doorways.

It may have appeared that we spoke different languages at first, but I quickly learned to speak yours and you learned to speak mine.

I remember teaching many of you to Salsa dance, and being so thrilled by all the holy laughter erupting between partners across generations. *Remember: Uno dos, tres, cinco, seis, siete! Squash!*

I remember taking a bow at Asheville Community Theater— and seeing you, my GCPC Family taking up about 90% of the seats.

I remember Marcia and I leading the choir in “*Plenty Good Room*” – with no song sheets – and feeling grateful for your willingness to be playful and fearless in your singing.

I remember feeling your support and your openness as I simultaneously grew more vulnerable and daring as a preacher, sharing my full self, my full heart from the pulpit.

You blessed my marriage, welcomed my son.
You entrusted me with your oh-so- wonderful children and with your most sacred stories.

These mountains have become my home.
Y’all have become my family.
And these rich years and chapters together have been fruits of the Spirit.

We have gone deep and been bold as a Staff, as a congregation, as a church family - connecting with partners across the city and the globe, even as far as our sister church, *Iglesia Jerusalem* all the way in Guatemala.

We have engaged in efforts to increase equity through our Serve Council, and have grown closer as a youth group doing service here and in unfamiliar cities. We have tried our hand at improv during Palooza, wrestled with life’s most profound questions in Confirmation and Bible Study, spearheaded a 20s/30s group for young adults to engage and connect. We have protested for change, for justice, worked to dismantle systems that divide us.

We have been creative together in worship,
we’ve mourned and celebrated alongside one another,
reimagined church life during the pandemic,
shared joys and hopes,
and I don’t even know how many slices of pizza and bowls of ice cream.

The truth is, Grace Covenant, you and I have always spoken the same language:
the sacred language of faith.

And when we have leaned on our faith, allowed it to fill us up,
when we have really trusted the Spirit moving in as and among us,
extraordinary, wild, wonderous things have unfolded.

~

“Why try to limit God’s Spirit?”

Pentecost is not about ordained clergy.
It is about ALL of God’s people – God’s people being filled with this abundance of faith.
Younger and older, different genders, shades, expressions...each of us, in our unique gifts, being
filled with God’s untamable Spirit, suddenly able to connect and communicate across differences
as faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

To live as Pentecost people means that we live *faith - full*.
We dare to speak the language of the brokenhearted,
we dare to challenge the comfortable,
we dare to march alongside the marginalized,
we dare to venture down the road less traveled,
We dare to be the church in a time when the world is so hungry for healing.

Beloved ones, through the years I have seen Christ’s face in each of you.
I have marveled at your Spirit-filled visions and dreams.

My time as one of your pastors has deepened my faith in more ways than I can count and has
even given me the moxie - the courage - to follow God’s Spirit towards something wholly new.
Now, as I step out in faith to minister to interfaith families in the Washington D.C. area and
beyond, I pray that I will be able to model the sort of irrepressible love and faithfulness that you
have shown me.

It isn’t easy for this Asheville-New Yorker to leave your sides.
My love for you is stronger than ever. But I trust that *we trust* the Spirit.

Just like our graduates, moving toward their new callings,
I know we will carry each other and all that we have shared in our hearts.
What we created together will bear fresh fruit and make room for new possibilities.
I know that GCPC’s devoted pastors, and staff, and session and youth group advisors
will continue to support you as you take leaps of faith together.

I know too that each of you will continue to be beacons of God’s awesome love and justice.

~

“Why limit God’s Spirit?”

Friends, when we let God’s Spirit surprise us, and fill us up, and order our steps, we are able to give and receive Christ’s blessings like never before.

Theologian Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way:

“All I am saying is that anyone can do this. Anyone can ask and anyone can bless, whether anyone has authorized you to do it or not. All I am saying is that the world needs you to do this, because there is a real shortage of people willing to kneel wherever they are and recognize the holiness holding its sometimes bony, often tender, always life-giving hand above their heads. That we are able to bless one another at all is evidence that we have been blessed, whether we can remember when or not. That we are willing to bless one another is miracle enough to stagger the very stars.”ⁱ

In my mind, at this very moment,
I am saying each and every one of your names,
I am seeing each and every one of your faces.

Church family, I am forever grateful that the Spirit led me to you.
Thank you for the blessing - the honor - of being your pastor.
I'm inspired for all of the ways you will continue to bless, and be blessed by one another.

Live as Pentecost people and step out *faith - full* always. Christ is calling.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor. *An Alter in the World: A Geography of Faith*. HarperOne; 1st edition (February 9, 2010)