

“An Extravagant Welcome” Acts 2:1-21 May 27, 2007 Pentecost  
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Kelly Fryer, a church development consultant, tells of a time in seminary when she was listening to an uninteresting lecture on a beautiful day when everyone would rather be outside. Apparently the professor sensed that nobody was being attentive because suddenly he closed his notebook and stopped talking. “He wasn’t going to waste one more breath on us,” she writes. But, before leaving the lecture hall, he picked up a piece of chalk and going to the blackboard he drew a huge arrow pointing straight down. He stood back and told the class, “If you understand that, you understand everything you need to know about what it means to be a Christian...” and with that he left the room. Everyone remained for a time staring at the arrow pointing downward. Fryer admits that the most logical thing she could think was, “He thinks we’re all going to hell.”

But the next time the class met the professor began his lecture by drawing that same arrow on the board. This time he had everyone’s complete attention. “Here’s what this means,” he told them. “God *always* comes down. God always comes down. There is never *anything* that we can do to turn that arrow around and by our own power make our way UP to God. God came down in Jesus. And God still comes down, in the bread and in the wine, in the water and in the fellowship of believers. God ALWAYS comes down.” (Kelly A. Fryer, *Reclaiming the “L” Word: Renewing the church from Its Lutheran Core* (Minneapolis, Minn: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 25-26.

Today, Pentecost Sunday, we celebrate God’s coming down in the form of Spirit, wind, and fire. It is another revelation of the incarnation (in creation) of God to us. We saw God’s incarnation in the Christ child; we heard God’s incarnation proclaimed in the baptism of Jesus and in the mountaintop experience of Jesus and the disciples when God’s voice says, “Listen to this One!”; we witnessed incarnation as we listened to the teachings of Jesus revealing to us God’s dream for this world; we grieved as God incarnate in Christ died on a cruel cross representing all the powers of this world; and we celebrated the God incarnate as the life and message and Spirit was proclaimed alive and well on Easter morning.

The seasons of our church year now bring us to Pentecost Sunday when God incarnate shows itself as wind, fire, and Spirit. This event happens at what seems akin to a conference of church leaders. Now conferences of church leaders may be exciting, boring, or divisive; but this one was empowered by the incarnate God. God comes down to a fledging group who were still keeping the Jesus dream alive, and God gives these few a transfusion more powerful than imaginable. These apostles have an “ah ha” moment. They get it. They understand that there is work to be done and good news to be shared. And they get with God’s program!

Now I must admit that this sermon came very slowly, and finally by Saturday morning (after I had trashed the first sermon draft) I understood why. This text, this Pentecost event, this “ah ha” moment, this mighty wind and fiery tongues is pure energy. But I, having just returned from the East coast, was experiencing jet lag. I had no energy. Have you ever “had no energy?”

Well, the heat of the summer is upon us and the heat may try to sap our energy; but I’m putting my favorite physicist to work on figuring out how to cool down this sanctuary without contributing to global warming so don’t give up on us and stay home this summer. Because we have work to do for the sake of the gospel. And the good news is that God never stays home; God never stays removed from humankind in the lofty clouds of heaven; God comes down to us *always*. So we may feel like we have jet lag; but the Spirit is just around the corner!

Usually when I talk about “an extravagant welcome” I’m prepared to address important issues of inclusively; but that was that first sermon I wrote on Thursday. And it just didn’t feel right. It didn’t feel like what the Spirit was leading me to say. So my “ah ha” moment was when I realized that “the extravagant welcome” is God’s coming down and welcoming us to a place that God says is our true home. This true home includes what happens after we die; but it also includes a creation which God keeps coming down and blessing with God’s presence and says “This world I made matters. So make it matter to you!”

We make this world matter in more ways than any one of us can imagine. The variety of gifts, of passion, of dedication, of love, of caring, of benevolence that I observe in this church is demonstrated in many beautiful and sometimes surprising acts of kindness and prophetic witness.

It is appropriate that on Pentecost Sunday we receive a special offering called "Strengthen the Church." Because it is through the church that we find a community to put our energies to work for the sake of the gospel. It is through the church that we show God that we "get it", that God's world matters, and we will play our role as faithfully as we can. It is through the power of our extended relationships beyond this church, relationships with our conference and with the United Church, that we receive power to be a witness in our time in history. Last year we received \$1250 from our conference. And we pledge to use them faithfully to witness to the Spirit through our ministry here.

The first Pentecost Sunday corresponded to the Jewish Festival of Weeks, a celebration of harvest and a time of covenant renewal. We have today the opportunity to celebrate the bountiful harvest of our blessings and to renew our covenant to the work of the church. For some of us our covenant shows up through the care of attending to physical and spiritual needs of church members. For others our covenant will appear as words of prophetic witness to the wrongs of our world.

Others of us may renew a covenant to education and to sharing their knowledge and wisdom to our children and youth. As a church we will continue our covenant to reach out to our community through our hunger kitchen and by offering God's extravagant welcome to those living nearby. And as a church we covenant to join ourselves to a larger church where the power of many becomes more than the sum of the power of individuals; our voices become multiplied; our witness becomes stronger.

We thank God today for this church which on May 20, 1912 received the Spirit in this place. It has been a blessing to many people over the years. We pray it is a blessing today. I would be remiss on this day if I failed to invite us to think about our future. Last Sunday Tom and I were at a church in Virginia where I had the great honor of baptizing our niece, Suzanna. As I observed that church and its resources, I couldn't help but think about this church that I love. By coincidence, they held a brief congregational meeting following the worship where they approved some financial commitments. As I listened, I began to ponder our little church, and I began to be concerned about sustaining our ministry that we do together here into the future. It is true that we are growing in membership. Yet, it is you long time members who have experienced the blessings of church over many years who love it enough to help ensure its future.

Some in the world would say that the church as an institution offers little to affect this world positively. But I believe and I pray that in our God inspired, Spirit infused San Dimas UCC that will not be the case. As we individually think about the ways we will witness within and without these walls, I must echo a thought brought up by Walt Davis at our January annual meeting. That is, that some of you who may no longer feel within your body the ability to be energetically doing, may feel the Spirit calling you to give to the endowment of this church so that what you have begun will continue into the future. Some of our members have more energy than money. Others have less energy but have been blessed by this church for many years and may have money to give. Today I invite us all to think about how we may "Strengthen Our Church". Because we believe that the Spirit of Pentecost did not return to the heavens never to be seen again; we believe the Spirit is alive and well with the energy of fire and wind, and that it is calling us to offer God's extravagant welcome to the creation that God loves and that God declared as good. May we be faithful and may it be so! AMEN

We listened as student after student crossed the stage to receive their diplomas. It was Britany's graduation from Northwestern Law School, and she, along with several hundred others, had come to this day of celebration and recognition. Some of the students came onto the stage holding their young children or babies in their arms. Others have "spirited" exclamations of joy and relief. The professor who announced each name must have studied a lot because the names were very different and represented many countries in the world. This day and those celebrated would go forth into the world hopefully to make a difference in many and varied ways. The fact that they were from many countries made the statement that knowledge of the law is not confined to one race, gender, or nationality. Knowledge is offered extravagantly for the sake of the whole wide world.

Similarly, on the day of Pentecost, the disciples gathered, and they made a powerful statement. Their statement was that the good news was offered extravagantly to the people of many tongues and from many places. The gospel of Jesus Christ was (and is) God's to give, and God's choice was an extravagant welcome.

Last Sunday I was welcomed by Three Chopt Presbyterian Church in Richmond, Virginia, to officiate at the sacrament of baptism for my niece Suzanna. The United Church of Christ has what is called a "formula of agreement" with three other Protestant denominations, the Presbyterian, USA, the Evangelical Lutherans, and the Reformed Church of America. This agreement says that we recognize the ordination of each others ministers and welcome their ministries in our churches. Though Suzanna was confirmed into membership in the Presbyterian church; she was baptized into the communion of all who who seek to follow the ways of Christ. Baptism is an extravagant welcome!

Our world often divides people into those who belong and those who don't. There are many "in-groups" and "out-groups" that categorize and exclude. Because God made us to live in community; it is painful if we become excluded from life lived within community. While people may exclude, God does not. The vision of God's wonderful life giving words being spoken and heard by all present on the day of Pentecost is a vision of the world as God would have it to be. It is a challenge to us today as it was a challenge on that day of Pentecost long ago. The world suggests to us that it's better to associate with those like us or those who will reflect well on us. The gospel commands us to reach out to those who need us. The world keeps us so busy as we try to provide for ourselves and our families that we rarely have the time to connect intentionally with relationships that require hard work and spiritual growth. The world teaches us it's good to be right; the gospel tells us it's better to be loving than having to always be right. The world supports our development as individuals; the gospel encourages the fulfillment of well-being for all creation. It is an extravagant welcome.

Perhaps I'm sensitive to this "extravagant welcome" idea because as a young person I was part of a church who welcomed others as long as those others would become like us. I felt a disconnect. I didn't believe my best friend, Betsy, a fine Methodist needed changing. My sister and I told Suzanna stories about our growing up and all the things we couldn't do because somewhere the Bible implied God was against these things. These "things" included dancing, wearing shorts and swim suits in public, of course drinking, most card games, and associating with "sinners", as well as generally having too much fun. We were to "welcome" outsiders as long as they didn't change or corrupt us. This made listening difficult; because if one truly listens to the other and engages the other, there is an openness to be influenced and changed by the other.

An "extravagant welcome" does not mean that we are so unsubstantial that anything goes. Or as Luther has quoted his father who was a preacher as saying: "You don't have to be so open minded that your brains fall out." But an extravagant welcome means an openness to the other, the different, the out-sider, the one who has nothing to offer us but to whom we can

offer God's love. And an extravagant welcome is powerful--like a mighty wind, a fire, a spirit. Pentecost is about power--spirit filled energy! It is the power that brings people together and then sends them forth into the world with good news and hope.

What is the Spirit wind calling us to today?

< It is calling us to freedom. We don't have to be what the world around us says we should be. We are free to live the song of our hearts. We have freedom of conscience. We have freedom to live in hope, not fear. We have freedom to be generous. We have the freedom to make mistakes and to learn from them. We have freedom to forgive ourselves and to forgive others. We are free from repeating the past. We are free to chart a new course. We are free to make the choices that will allow us not to sell our souls for the sake of oil.

< The Spirit is also calling us to engage the world. The apostles didn't tell the folks who didn't talk like them to go home. Through the Spirit they could be understood. The Spirit cannot be controlled or confined to one nation, one people, one program. The Spirit belongs to the same God that created the East, the West, the North, the South and all creatures who live within the circle of life. The rest of the world matters to the Spirit, and so it matters to us. This means I must be generous. I must give to those in Sudan who suffer; I must spend time to understand how my choices affect those who try to make a living in faraway places. For me this means buying our Equal Exchange coffee, buying Unique cards and products from cooperatives in poor countries. Because the world matters, I must use less pollutants so the air will be cleaner.

< The Spirit calls us to "Make the Circle Wide" the title of a song by Curran . This requires humility because in the end it is God who determines the circumference of the circle. History has had a habit of drawing the circle as it has so chosen; but histories circle may not be the circle of God's choosing. The Feast of Weeks which was the Jewish feast that gathered together those who first experienced the Spirit of Pentecost was a time to renew the covenant between God and the Jewish people. It was one of the Jews' family gatherings; perhaps like our family reunions writ large. At a family reunion we see our differences and yet we acknowledge that we belong to the same circle. (I love my parents even-though as a child, I couldn't dance or wear swimsuits in public.) The circle is much broader than particularities; because the circle is drawn by hand of God; and the hand of God reaches out in an extravagant welcome.

The summer is at hand. It is a season when often schedules change and there may be opportunities for engaging each other, our community, and our world in different and more welcoming ways. I pray we will be still enough to notice, loving enough to care, and energized enough to do the Spirit's work. The Spirit blows where it will, and I pray it will blow through us, empowering the church once again, and drawing an ever widening circle through our extravagant welcome.