

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, May 28, 2023

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### Acts 2:1-15

In a moment we will read together from the book of Acts, the second chapter; so if you didn't bring your Bible with you, you can grab one of the blue pew Bibles and turn to the second chapter. We're going to read verses 1 through 15 together. But before we do that and before we also pray, I just have to confess to you that I love Pentecost. I love this celebration that actually precedes the celebration and the birth of the Christian church. And this is, of course, for us if you might remember, the reason why those faithful people had gathered 50 days after Passover together. They had done that to celebrate, and it was during that gathering that we have this experience that we're going to read about in just a moment. So it not only is the holiday that we get to celebrate together, but it reminds us of the way in which we are bound together with our Jewish brothers and sisters as well. I'm grateful for that and grateful for time for us to spend in scripture together learning what it is the spirit has to teach us. Before we read from the text, let us go to God in prayer.

As you moved over the waters of creation, Spirit, we pray that you would move once again here. Move amongst us and within us, quieting any voice within us but your own, that we might hear your word for us this day, and that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

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 people 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 of 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: 'Fellow Jews 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.

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The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So as Jeanene just shared with our children, this is indeed a day when we celebrate the birth of the Christian Church together. There is a sentimental feel to that celebration most certainly. What we are not doing, however, is celebrating the presence of the spirit for the first time. Indeed, the spirit of God has been spoken of in scripture from the very beginning of the text. Genesis tells us that the spirit was present hovering over the waters of creation. Later the prophets, as they look across the valley of dry bones, will speak of the spirit in the body and within that valley those bones, and raising them from the dead. In the beginning of the gospels when we read of John being baptized and then just a little while later Jesus being baptized, the spirit is present there as well, present also, of course, through Jesus Christ as he promises an advocate to follow that will be present with the disciples. So this is indeed a sentimental day when we celebrate the birth of the church, but it's also a scandalous day. This is a birthday, yes, and a wild experience.

I know that we have a beautiful banner here of the flames and the dove descending, and often when we think of Pentecost, we imagine that Presbyterian USA cross, perhaps, and the dove that's present in it, that is descending upon the people.

And I can appreciate that still and beautiful and peaceful imagery, and I can also say that it cannot fully encapsulate what is actually happening in this place, when all have gathered in one place together. The spirit falls upon them and scrambles their ability to speak. They begin to speak in new languages and not just that, not just speaking in languages that they haven't studied, they haven't reflected upon, they haven't practiced, but also understanding in languages that are not their own. It's why we go through this laundry list. And every preacher will tell you that Pentecost is a special day, but it's also a scary day because when you begin to read the text from verse 9 through verse 11, you are worried you're going to mispronounce every one of those places, all of those names. If you felt like I sped up a little bit it's because that's the pace with which I practiced it this morning. But the people start asking, "Are not all of these who have gathered, aren't they Galileans? Isn't that where they're from? Then why do we hear them speaking in our own native language?" And then they kind of begin to raise their hands. "Where are you from? We're Parthians. We're Medes; we're Elamites; we live in Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia. We're from Egypt; we're from the part of Libya that belongs to Cyrene. We're actually just visiting from Rome."

All these people begin to say, "We're from all these different places, and yet we understand what these people are saying clearly, as if it were our own native language."

And it strikes me that there is sentiment in this day, but there is also something scandalous. It was scandalous, most certainly, when it happened at that Pentecost, a couple of thousand years ago.

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The idea that all these different people from all these different places with all sorts of different history and probably different theological beliefs, political beliefs, social beliefs, they've...they've all gathered in this one place some 50 days after Passover to celebrate together.

On its face it might not seem all that radical, but I would think it was in that time. And if you don't believe that, then think about the time that we live in now.

In this time it is radical to intentionally be a part of a community that holds together a diversity of social, theological, political belief, to be a part of a community that represents all generations and different stages of life, to be a part of a community where status melts away as you come into this place, to be a part of community that's representative of gender and nationality and race as well. That is what the church is, of course, supposed to be.

Pentecost, then, endangers the status quo in our society. Pentecost endangers the idea that we are to make friends and company with those who are only just like us.

And so then we experience Pentecost anytime we intentionally choose to be a part of a community that holds difference as actually critical to being the body of Christ together.

And more than that, we experience Pentecost any time we sit with someone long enough to hear them speaking in their own language.

Too often we want things translated to us, we want them to speak in vocabulary that makes sense to us. And, yet, what Pentecost teaches us is that when the spirit arrives, the particularities of the speech of the people seems to mean less and less; and what seems to mean more and more is that the spirit indwells them.

This past week I got invited to a dinner party with a group that I hadn't been a part of.

The Key family invited us to come and sit at table together for this gathering of members of a group called Sacred Ground. Maybe you remember it being advertised several months ago. Maybe you know, or if you're new to us you might not know, that efforts in anti-racism and dismantling white supremacy are core to how we understand ourselves as the Church of Jesus Christ that is called Idlewild. Well, part of our continued work happened in a small group called Sacred Ground. They gathered after studying together. They would study for a couple weeks and then gather and work through material together. They would pray together and reflect together and speak together. As I was sitting in the living room of the Key family this week, I began to feel a movement of the spirit of God. Sitting quietly as they discussed what it was that went well about their time together, what it was that could be improved for the next time we do Sacred Ground and what might be next for this group.

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They spoke of how important it was that the group was intergenerational, not just in age but also in the amount of time they had been a part of the Idlewild community. They spoke with honesty about their initial disappointment that the group wasn't as diverse as they would have wished, but then they spoke about how important it was that this particular group got to walk together in this important gospel-centered work. They spoke about how the longer they sat with each other the more they began to understand each other. They gave each other space to talk things out, knowing that the space in which they shared it was safe for everyone.

The spirit made a little bit of a holy mess of the plans for Sacred Ground, but that group stayed together. And what happened there was they stayed together long enough that they began to understand each other speaking in their own language. And they were also equipped with the language that they didn't previously have, a way of speaking about how they moved through the world, and about powers and principalities that they didn't have coming into that room.

And I think that's something akin to what is happening as we celebrate and as we remember Pentecost together. We are celebrating and lifting up our belief that even when we gather in our very polite company, in a small group if you will, behind even a closed door, the spirit of God might just show up and make a holy mess of our plans. Nadia Boltz Weber talks about her church. She preached the sermon not long ago at the Festival of Homiletics. That's a wonderful preaching festival. Actually, Courtney just got back from that not too long ago. She preached the sermon and she talked about her little church, the one that she helped to start. The name of that church is House For All Sinners and Saints. She says this,

“The spirit, while called the comforter, does not bring the warm chocolate chip cookies and night-night story kind of comfort that we might imagine. The spirit actually brings the comfort of the truth, and if you've had any experience of the truth whatsoever, then you can testify that it is not exactly cozy. It sure didn't feel cozy to me last summer when my congregation experienced a bit of a demographic shift. Some Churches might fear drag queens and homeless folks. We don't. All of a sudden last summer at the House For All Sinners and Saints, we had middle aged people driving in from the suburbs, people who wear Dockers and eat at Applebee's.” She says, “We were a special kind of church, a DIY kind of church. We made art and we sang a capella and we sat in the round together.

I started to resent that my precious little Indie boutique of a church was turning into a 7-Eleven, and I was terrified that the more edgy, marginalized people who had always been attracted to our church would now come and see a bunch of people who look just like their parents and think, “Well, this obviously isn't for me.” Nadia says, “So I called a church meeting for us to talk about the growth and demographic shifts that we were experiencing at House, with the hopes that if the people who had been around our church from the beginning just said who they were and what the church was about, the people who had come in from the suburbs would self-select, realizing that it wasn't really meant for them. Even while I was planning it, it felt wrong,” she says. “Luckily, before we were able to be all together in one place for that stupid idea of a meeting, the plan changed. The plan changed because I underwent what can only be described as a heart

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transplant. This is what the prophet Ezekiel describes when God said to him, 'I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.' But it didn't feel like a removal, though, removal is far too pleasant of a word. My heart was ripped out. When my own heart starts to feel bitter and judgmental and hard, God says to me, 'Enough;' and without anesthesia, without a sterile environment, God reaches in and rips out my heart of stone and replaces it again and again with a heart of flesh. You think...you think that with as often as this particular procedure happens to me, I'd have like a Ziploc or something installed in my chest for easy access. The heart transplant happened, though, when I called my friend Russell, whom I expected to sympathize with me. Russell, though, refused to cooperate. 'Yeah, that sucks,' he said, 'You guys are really good at welcoming the stranger when it's a young trans person, but, Nadia, sometimes the stranger looks like your mom and dad.'

And I wanted to hold the phone out in front of me and yell, 'You're supposed to be my friend,' before hanging up. But, of course, I couldn't, because in that moment I could feel actual blood and love pumping through my body for what felt like the first time in weeks. Russell had spoken truth to me and the truth set me free. My friends, that is the work of the Holy Spirit, and I'm here to tell you that it didn't feel like a chocolate chip cookie or a night-night story.

When the day of the meeting finally arrived, I knew what really needed to happen. The new folks in the Dockers needed to tell us who they were and why they had decided to come and be a part of our community, so that the younger folks with the tattoos and the piercings who'd been there since the beginning could hear what this church was actually about. So I sucked it up, and I told them this horrible thing that Russell had said to me about welcoming our parents, and then one of the early members of the church—Asher—spoke up and said, 'As a young trans kid I was welcomed into this community, but I just want to go on record as saying that I'm really glad that there are people at this church now who look like my mom and dad, because I can have a relationship with them that I just can't have with my own parents.' And there we all were, flawed, smug, confused, embarrassed, and embarrassing, in other words, the very people to whom God sends the spirit to mess everything up, the very people God loves enough to send the crazed bird with barbed talons and a predatory beak to come and snatch out our stony hearts and replace them with the comfort of God's Own. Because the truth of Pentecost is that God has not changed. Just like that first Pentecost, God still says yes to all of our polite no thank yous. God still crashes our parties and invites in the people whom we are trying to avoid. That's the thing about the Pentecost Spirit of Truth. It feels like the truth might crush us and it does, and then the instant it crushes us, it puts us back together into something real, perhaps for the first time ever, because the radical, mysterious, sentimental, and dangerous thing about the spirit is that it is always forming us into the body of Christ, sometimes despite us, sometimes against us, but always for us, because it is only the spirit who can turn us from they into a we."

Nadia says, "We are a stronger church now. Now you can look around on any given Sunday and think to yourself, 'I am unclear what all of these people have in common,' because in one corner of your eye there is an unhoused friend serving communion to a corporate lawyer, now the other

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corner a teenage girl with pink hair holding the baby of a suburban soccer mom. And there I was just a short time ago fearing that the weirdness of our church was going to dilute it.”

This day we celebrate the birth of a beautiful and good and hope-filled and radical community.

It is a day for sentiment most assuredly, but it's a day also for us to be reminded that this community is to be radical. It is to be set against what it is that society tells us it ought to be. It is to be filled with all sorts of different beliefs and thoughts. We are to come from all sorts of different stations and ages. We are to come into this place because we are brought here by the very spirit of God. So I wonder on this Pentecost day...I wonder on this Pentecost day the places in which our hearts have been made into stone for our neighbor.

I wonder the places in which God is actually desiring by the power of the spirit to reach within us and replace our hearts of stone with hearts of openness and love for all, because I imagine when we are able to put our fingers on that, we will indeed be the church that God called together at Pentecost, the one alive in the spirit, where all are brought together and bound in the spirit of love.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.