

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
June 9, 2019
Pentecost Sunday
Acts 2:1-21

“What’s Up, Church?”

Have you ever seen the movie “The Blues Brothers”? It’s about two brothers, Jake and Elwood, who have a blues band. After Jake’s release from prison, he and Elwood decide to go and visit the old orphanage where they were raised by nuns. There, they learn that the church stopped supporting the orphanage and has plans to sell it. The only way to keep the place open is if the \$5000 tax on the property is paid within 11 days. The brothers want to help and decide to put their blues band back together and raise the money by staging a big gig. As they set off they seem to make more enemies than friends. Will they manage to come up with the money in time?

Now, you may be thinking, “What the heck does “The Blues Brothers” have to do with Pentecost?” A lot! If you’ve seen the movie you know the Blues Brothers are on a mission from God. “Me and the Lord, we got an understanding,” Jake says. “Yeah, we’re on a mission from God,” replies Elwood.

Those disciples, they were on a mission from God. The Holy Spirit made sure of that.

You know, there’s a troublemaker in every family, and in the family of the Trinity-God, Christ, and Holy Spirit - the Holy Spirit is the troublemaker. On Pentecost the Spirit comes in like the rush of a violent wind, filling the entire house and then rests like a tongue of fire on each of the disciples. Now, you just know when something like that happens there’s bound to be drama. There’s nothing quite like a dramatic entrance and the Holy Spirit knows how to make one.

We’ve tried to tame the Spirit over the years. We used to refer to the Holy Spirit as the Holy Ghost. Remember that? I don’t know when we switched the language, and I don’t know why we switched. I’m sure there was a scriptural reason for it, but there was probably a realistic reason, too, and that is that Holy Ghost is just too darn scary for us. So we tamed the Holy Ghost and started

calling her Holy Spirit and now, sometimes, simply Spirit. But the Spirit we meet in Acts was anything but tame. Fire is not tame. Violent winds are not tame. This is not a tame spirit. This is a bold Holy Spirit that bewilders the crowd and calls the disciples to attention.

The Spirit kicked those disciples to the curb – made them get out there and do something with all that stuff Jesus taught them — and basically gave them the same message the nun gave to Jake and Elwood – don't come back until your mission is done.

Up until the Holy Spirit's arrival the disciples were pretty much just hanging out. They left Galilee after Jesus ascended to heaven, went to Jerusalem like the angel instructed them to do, and elected Mathias to replace Judas. But that was about it. For all we know they were sitting around reminiscing about the good old days and kind of feeling sorry for themselves that their best days with Jesus were behind them.

But then the Holy Spirit comes, just like Jesus promised, and changes things because the Holy Spirit's presence is as disruptive as it is comforting. The Spirit, just like we sang earlier, stirs us from placidness like a wind on the sea . . . and winds on the sea aren't always gentle. Sometimes winds on the sea have a hurricane like force, and when they hit the shore they change things forever.

The Spirit in our story from Acts comes with hurricane-like force, and disrupts the disciples' lives, throwing them off course and forcing them to re-think how things are going to be. There would no longer be "this is how we've always done things" or "this is how we've gotten used to things being done" . . . not now . . . because the Spirit forced them to take a different path.

My guess is that if someone had handed the disciples the option of A: choosing to stay in Jerusalem huddled in an upper room where they would be safe or option B: getting kicked to the curb by the Holy Spirit where life would be risky, they would have chosen A. Most of us would choose A. We understand A. A is comfortable, it suits our tastes, and we're confident in our abilities to handle what path A throws at us. We trust A. Especially in the church. The things we do, the practices we've adopted through the years, our traditions – we know them like the backs of our hands.

But A isn't always good for us, which is why I believe the Holy Spirit sometimes comes along and gives us trouble and grief and forces us to choose B, because B is what we really should do but would never voluntarily choose to do if left to our own free will. B forces us to innovate, experiment, and explore and let go of those tried and true practices that are only working for a population that is getting smaller. Path B forces us to figure out together what works in this day and age . . . for those who are coming, for those who haven't been coming lately, and for those who have never come.

A year ago this Sunday I preached my first sermon as your pastor. It was titled "The Safe Zone". I joked about my dog Mercy and the electric fence we'd just installed, and how she hated the fence and didn't want to play in "the safe zone". I commented that dogs, who basically want everyone to be their friend, hate fences and will do anything to get over, under, or around them. They do not have the reasoning capacity of humans, thank God. I then went on to make the point that we as a church are called to move beyond the safe zone, too.

This past year we've moved beyond the safe zone in small, subtle ways. But we also joined together in Lent on Wednesday nights in our "Seeking the Heart of God in the Heart of the City" series to talk about how we can move out the safe zone in bigger ways. All in all, we may have had as many as 100 of you attend the series. And after hearing from 4 leaders in our community, everyone gathered together – about 70 in all – and came up with 178 ideas for how we can move out of our safe zone. 178 ideas!! Never in a million years did I think there would be that many ideas put forth. Truth be told, I didn't even know if anyone would show up! But show up you did. Peter says in the Acts reading to dream big dreams, and many of the ideas put forth are big dreams!

Some of the common threads weaving in and out of the 178 ideas include establishing a relationship with Washington Elementary School, which is our neighborhood school down the street on Washington. And some of the things suggested by you and the principal are very doable – like collecting toiletries and socks and underwear for the kids and distributing them at the beginning of the year, because the kids there need those things. We can do that. But some of the ideas are bigger, like starting a summer arts camp for them next summer. That's

big. But I would also remind you it's not impossible – you did that 51 years ago when you started what is now Wellspring.

Another idea that has bubbled to the service is hosting a church-wide, neighborhood-wide day of service, where we'd partner with different organizations to help make our neighborhood a better place to live, work and play.

Another common theme that ran throughout the 178 ideas was the arts, which raises the question "What should the arts ministry here at First Pres look like? Will the next 50 years look like the first 50 years?" To be honest, it probably won't. But I also don't come with a preconceived idea for what it should look like. I only know that it should fit who we are and what our current context is, because all ministry is contextual . . . or at least it should be.

A noticeable missing theme is what do we do for and with all these young adults are moving downtown, working downtown, and coming downtown. That theme was missing, but it's important and we need to think about that and do something about that.

So those are some of the themes that ran throughout.

Friends, I want you to know how thoroughly I have enjoyed my first year with all of you. Every Sunday as I step forward to welcome you, I am filled with gratitude that God called me to you and you to me. I am also incredibly proud of your resiliency, your love for the church and each other, and your willingness to think differently and come up with 178 ideas! I'm looking forward to what the Spirit has in store for us for year 2, and I truly believe, with all my heart, that God has given us everything we need to fulfill the mission God has put us on. Because we are on a mission from God!

So follow the Spirit.

Be brave and stir the embers. Kick up the flames. Dream new dreams. Because honestly, what is the worst thing that could happen?

And so I leave you with this Pentecost blessing:

May the Gifts of the Holy Spirit
bring fire to the earth
so that the presence of God
may be seen
in a new light,
in new places,
in new ways.

May our own hearts
burst into flame
so that no obstacle,
no matter how great,
ever obstructs the message
of God within each of us.

And may we come to trust
the Word of God in our heart,
to speak it with courage,
to follow it faithfully
and to fan it to flame in others.
Amen.

Sources:
Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3