

God's Odd

Acts 2:1-21, 37-47

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For hundreds of years, until relatively recent times, Pentecost was as much a celebration in the church as Christmas and Easter. For Pentecost was the day that commemorated the coming of God's Holy Spirit. It was regarded as the birthday of the church. The scripture lesson today is the story of that marvelous and odd day, a day so strange, in fact, that Peter preached a whole sermon to explain what it meant and we will hear part of that sermon in the text this morning. Listen for God's word.

In a recent ABC News special, "In the Name of God," Peter Jennings interviewed John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship (one of those independent evangelical groups that have been growing so rapidly in this country). In the interview, Wimber spoke about the first time he attended church. He was already an adult. He listened attentively to the sermon, was fascinated by what he heard, so he went back. The same thing happened the next Sunday. He was enthralled.

Three Sundays in a row he returned to church, but by this time he was beginning to experience frustration, so following the service, he approached an official looking man and asked, "When do they do it?"

"Do what?"

"The stuff," Wimber answered.

"What stuff?"

"The stuff in the Bible."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, multiplying loaves and fishes, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind. That stuff."

"Oh," the man replied apologetically, "we don't do that. We believe in it, and we pray about it, and talk about it, but we don't do that."

What then does it mean, this *stuff* we talk about? That was the question they asked at Pentecost. You remember how it was, how all the people had come together in one place, like some meeting of the U. N. The Parthians were there . . . and the Medes . . . and the Elomites . . . people from Mesopotamia and Phrigia and Pamphylia . . . people of every land and every language . . . and then the oddest thing happened. Though everyone *spoke* in their own native language, each *heard* in *his* own native language. Parthians understood Medes, Medes understood Elomites and scripture says, "all were perplexed, asking what does this mean?"

Well, for some it was so odd that the only possible explanation was "they are drunk with new wine." Peter, however, is quick to protest, "No, they're not drunk. Why, it is only nine o'clock in the morning! Granted, it is an odd occurrence, but it is not as you suppose." And then Peter proceeds to explain in this sermon that has become one of the most famous sermons of all time. "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." You've heard it a thousand times. And you know Peter is quoting the Old Testament prophet, Joel. Only *here* Peter is putting a New Testament spin on it. The difference is that Jesus has come and gone, has died

and been resurrected. So the people now suppose they are without a Savior.

Note carefully the *odd* sequence of the Pentecost events. For ordinarily, when a church gets *fired up*, we think of it, if we think of it at all, as happening when some fireball preacher under the power of the Holy Spirit is so charismatic and spirit-filled that he or she gets the congregation so excited that they do all sorts of amazing things; they start new mission projects, they sponsor a missionary overseas, they launch a campaign to build a new sanctuary or a new educational building, or go out on a new endowment program, or double the Sunday school. That's usually the way churches think — and if we can just get the right preacher — *George Buttrick*, or *Billy Graham*, or *Robert Shuller* — then the Holy Spirit of God will descend upon us, things will happen, people will come, the church will grow and God will be praised.

That's the way we usually think. And incidentally, that is the way most ministers think. You'd be surprised. We ministers get mail all the time for promotional seminars — *how to fire up your congregation* — *how to create a Spirit-filled church* — seminars usually conducted by the same people who run motivational workshops for middle managers and car salesmen — and the whole thing is based on the premise that if you can just find the right leader, miracles will happen . . . *if we find the right leader*.

I know leadership is important, absolutely crucial. This church is currently in the process of searching for a new senior minister who will lead it into the twenty-first century. That selection will be critical. But do not lose the meaning of Pentecost. Peter's sermon came *in response* to what was *already* happening in the congregation. Peter's sermon was an explanation of what had *already* taken place in the congregation.

On Pentecost, curiosity-seekers had come from the outside because word had gotten out about what was going on in that church, and Peter's sermon was an explanation to those who were standing outside the church looking in, curious to know "*what does this mean?*" It was not the preacher who fired up the Pentecost crowd. It was the Holy Spirit of God moving so powerfully through that little congregation of neophyte Christians that they attracted the attention of the whole town. The curious came to see what it meant and the preacher simply set out to explain it.

There is a lot about southern religion that I find offensive, but there is a lot that I find *inspiring, authentic, enticing*. (I suppose one could say that about northern religion or western religion.) But one of the rich experiences for me with southern religion has been the opportunity for friendship with some of the clergy and some of the members of churches of the southern Black church tradition. And on a number of occasions that friendship led to a pulpit exchange, or to an invitation to preach in a church of the African-American tradition. I will admit that the first time an invitation came I was terrified, because I knew I was trespassing on a tradition different from my own. I knew, for example, that they had a way of responding to the preacher during the sermon with *Amens* and other words of encouragement, *Preach it, brother! Say it, sister! Yes, Lord!* and I was not quite sure I could handle that. Why, I might lose my place in my notes — *so Presbyterian*. But on the other hand, I was afraid they might not say *Amen* and what would that mean?

Well, I need not have worried, because they were very understanding and gracious. The *Amens* did come. But what I remember most vividly about the experience was one distinguished white-haired elder in the church, sitting behind the pulpit directly behind the preacher (where he had sat every Sunday for years, I was

told) who as soon as I began the sermon, starting softly, but building as the sermon progressed, *Ain't no harm in preaching, son Ain't no harm in preaching Ain't no harm in preaching, son.* And it was a lesson in homiletics I never learned in seminary . . . or in the library reading Calvin.

It was the lesson of Pentecost. It is that more preachers are made by spirit-filled churches, than churches by spirit-filled preachers. What inspired Peter's sermon was that that congregation was acting so spirited, saying things and doing things, that people had never seen and heard before in any synagogue. *What did it mean?*

Flannery O'Connor, paraphrasing Jesus' words, writes, "If you continue in my word, you will know the truth, and the truth will make you odd." Now that is a peculiar thing to say, especially in a culture where conformity counts so much, but *that* is the Pentecost lesson. And that is God's word this morning to you who are being ordained and installed as leaders — called by God, to be role models for this congregation — and no less so for every one of us who has been baptized and has received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and heard the promise "Behold if anyone is in Christ they are a new creation, the old is past and gone, the new has come." Because we're all ordained. That was the defining tenet of the Reformation, the priesthood of all believers. We are all ordained. You don't have to wait for a priest to perform the work of God in the world. We are already ordained. And here's the kicker, we are ordained to be odd.

Flannery O'Connor is so right, and so often ignored. "...continue in God's word and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you odd." Each of us, at our baptism, is ordained to live a life the world will call *odd*, so odd in fact, they will flock to the doors, peep in the windows and through the keyholes and cracks in the plaster, just to find out what's going on there. That's what happened at Pentecost. And do you remember the way the day ended? When Peter finished the sermon, they asked the second question. First, before the sermon, "What does it mean?" and after the sermon, "What should we do?" Peter's congregation that day rightly understood that the Christian faith is not primarily about beliefs or about ideas or doctrines. It is about a way of living.

By the time for the benediction, the Pentecost congregation had come to realize that the Christian faith is truth that is done, and that if Peter's sermon had interpreted Pentecost properly, much of their lives, lived according to the customs of the day, made no sense at all. As one has put it, "to be a witness does not consist in engaging in propaganda or even in stirring people up, but in being a living mystery. It means to live in a way that one's life would make no sense if God did not exist.

So we skip to the end of the day. Remember the words,

Those who welcomed Peter's message were baptized and about 3,000 were added. Awe came over everyone, because many signs and wonders were being done. All who believed were together and had all things in common. They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, each as had need. They spent time together in the temple (that is, they worshipped together), they broke bread and ate with glad and generous hearts, praising God, and having the good will of the people.

The church became an oddity the ancient world had not previously encountered: unprecedented generosity, unparalleled compassion for the poor and the different,

(neither Jew or Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female). The dividing walls were broken down, the community was one, the young were seeing visions, the old dreaming dreams, there was joy, and there was hope. These things were happening not because they had found some hotshot preacher to “pump ‘em up,” but because the Holy Spirit of God was moving in their midst, and they were attentive to it.

Let me tell you about the oddest congregation I think I’ve ever seen. I worshipped there some thirty years ago. The memory still lingers. They met in an old house on Massachusetts Avenue in Washington, D. C. — only about 220 members — maybe a few more by now — but a small congregation. On any Sunday, however, there are three-to-four times as many worshippers as members, mostly curiosity seekers like me who had heard about the church and come to see what was going on. They call themselves The Church of the Savior.

What is unique about The Church of the Savior is their vision of what a church ought to be — and their unapologetic boldness about what that means. Persons are not allowed to join that church until they have visited for a year, then only after a strenuous series of orientation classes. They want to make certain people understand what they are about and what is expected of them. There is a discipline that requires faithful attendance at worship. Also, everyone, regardless of age, must engage in some form of weekly formal Bible study, either during Sunday school or sometime during the week, summer as well as winter. Everyone must participate in some form of witness or outreach, and there are numerous options. The church, for example, owns a farm outside D. C., where the homeless and addicted go and start over, with meaningful work in a supportive community. Moreover, every member must tithe. I tell you, it is an odd bunch.

But I confess I find this church strangely attractive in a culture where churches tend to compete with one another like shopping centers in offering the most convenience, the most comfort, the most variety in programming, the biggest show, the best bargains, the most parking. I find it attractive, that in this little D. C. congregation, daring to be so odd, every Sunday there will be three-to-four times as many nonmembers as members, especially in this time of diminishing expectation of the church. As a culture we do not expect much. Sometimes even in church itself, we do not expect much. We talk boldly about miracles, our language and prayers reflect optimism and hope. The liturgy is filled with that stuff. But by and large, we don’t *do* that — very much — do we?

So what does it mean, this *stuff* we talk about on Pentecost? The first thing it means is that the Pentecost flame still burns, and the Pentecost wind still blows, the Spirit of God has not abandoned the world, nor left the church. What that means this morning, in particular, is that you who in a few moments will join your colleagues on Consistory in vowing to lead this colony of God’s people into the twenty-first century — and do not lose the significance of the fact that you are being installed into the class of the year 2000 — are vowing to look and to listen in earnest anticipation with openness for the promise of God’s spirit. And those of you who vow with equal integrity to support these whom you have elected to be interpreters of that spirit for our time, are called to dream some dreams, and to imagine such visions that you have never dared before. It means you are being challenged to run the risk of being called odd, by a culture that has come not to expect very much outside the ordinary from the church. Just imagine, just envision, for a moment, a church where the leadership was 100% dedicated, and

so disciplined, and so determined to make a difference that people would come here just to *see* what it means. One of the finest compliments I remember a church receiving was a dozen or so years ago in another town. . . a phone call from a woman I did not know. Her language was poor, but she made herself plain. Her little boy was starting school. He had bad eyes, was told he needed glasses, but there wasn't enough money for glasses. She had called another church, actually a church much larger and more affluent than the church I was serving at the time, but she said, "They told me to call you, because, they told me, your church *did* that kind of thing." Envision how it would be, the church telephones ringing off the hook just to see if it were true, because the word was going around — the church *did* things like that — I'm not talking about eyeglasses — I mean — odd things, bold things, that defied the cultural mores and exceeded ordinary expectations.

"What does it mean?" That is what they wanted to know at Pentecost. And for them it became commonplace that all were generous, that all were disciplined in their study and in their worship, and in their witness and in their prayers, and that all were welcome, and that families worshipped together. And everybody sang, even those who couldn't carry a tune or didn't like the words. Everybody sang. And the budget was oversubscribed. Envision it! And odder still, imagine it all happening in a transition year, *before* the new minister even arrives. Because, you know, there's no greater temptation that a church faces than the temptation to mark time, while waiting for the Savior to come. Such is to forsake our Reformed tradition, and worse, it is to turn a deaf ear to what the Spirit is saying.

In the tenth century, when the church was still very young, more literal, more naive, I suppose, less learned, and less sophisticated, less submissive to the culture — in the tenth century, when they erected those medieval sanctuaries, they would leave holes in the roof, which was an odd thing to do actually, with the rain and the pigeons and what all. But they called them Holy Spirit holes. The townfolk ridiculed them, of course, but apparently those early Christians did not mind the ridicule, because they kept doing it. More importantly, they wanted to allow every opportunity for the Spirit to descend upon them. An odd way of thinking, except to God.