

# *Preaching Pentecost in a Secular Context*

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The first confirmation class that I met at my current church was filled with young people that I did not recognize. I assumed this was because I was new and, somehow, had missed seeing the twenty to thirty ninth graders in worship over those first six months while looking out at the faces of people in the pews. It turned out that the *vast* majority of the class was not in worship. Neither were their families. I learned that lack of involvement or connection to the church before the start of confirmation was a common experience at Mercer Island Presbyterian Church. Many people in the wider community of the church took the view of faith development that I had taken about swim lessons. I did not start my children in swimming lessons as infants or toddlers. I waited until they were old enough that I was no longer required to get into the pool with them. I didn't want to get wet. I didn't want to shower at the YMCA with plastic flip flops on and still have the lingering smell of chlorine in my hair. So for swim lessons, I waited. My kids began to take swimming lessons once I could walk them inside and point them toward the pool, reminding them to rinse off before greeting their teacher. Our confirmation class works in a similar fashion for 9<sup>th</sup> graders in our local community. Many families wait until their children can navigate a community of faith on their own, sign them up online, and point them in the direction of the youth room.

Last year, one of my colleagues ran into a group of our confirmation students' parents out at dinner and invited them to church. "Oh, thanks," one mom responded in a friendly tone. "But, honestly, everything is going fine. We just don't need church." We just don't need church. As a church leader, this is a hard comment to wrestle with, and yet is it the very real feeling of people in my own community and in communities throughout the country? Maybe there are areas of the country where people are less likely to name their disinterest in church out loud to a pastor in a restaurant, but that feeling exists for people in every community today.

While the conversation around the unaffiliated church-goer has been on the rise for the past ten or even twenty years in the national landscape, it has been a constant reality in the Pacific Northwest since people from traditionally Christian cultures first began living here. More than a century ago, in 1914, religious leaders gathered for a symposium to try to understand what happened to good, faithful, *active*, church members who moved to Washington State. Did they forget the Great Commission somewhere around the Rockies? Did the book of Acts get forgotten? One professor described the problem simply: "In the East they were faithful church members; now they are not even church attenders."<sup>1</sup>

Seattle, and the Pacific Northwest (PNW) as a whole, has been dubbed "the None Zone" – the place where its residents, when asked about their church affiliation, answered "none of the above" at a higher rate than any other region of the country. It is not that people have not heard about God. They just do not show up with any regularity to church. People in the PNW are not joiners. They do not show up to organized religion or to organized anything. There is no animosity toward the church,

just an overall lack of enthusiasm. The “Nones” may come to an Easter or Christmas service with someone, maybe a worship service when the youth are commissioned on their mission trip, to a memorial service for the parent of a friend, or something special for someone who asks. But they do not attend worship services because they feel compelled to participate in the life of the community of faith or give praise to God.

Living and serving in this community has convinced me that Pentecost is not a sermon that we preach once a year. Pentecost is not a day. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit in perpetuity. It is the power of the Spirit to work and breathe in our lives and ministry, to point to the hope of the resurrection in places where we only see death and wreckage, to shift us out of our frozen state and bring us to life. Pentecost is something we need to preach in every sermon, in every youth mission trip commissioning service, in every memorial service, and in every service where people who see no need for church walk through the door.

Last year, Eric, the parent of one of our youth program alumni, asked if I had time to get together. His kids had grown up in the church, and so he had attended a handful of different services at MIPC over the years, all the while remaining firmly planted in the camp of “I just don’t need church.” His wife had been involved for years in the past, but from all I could tell, church was her thing. The request was the kind that came without a lot of information. I wasn’t sure what Eric wanted to talk about. I wondered if his wife was sick or one of his kids was in trouble. Or if he just wanted to rent out the gym for a fundraising event in the community.

When Eric came in, he was visibly shaken. He said, “I’m going to tell you something that I don’t know if you’ll believe. I just don’t know who else to tell.” And then he went on to share that more than a month earlier, he was sitting at his kitchen table alone before the sun came up, drinking coffee. At the table he felt (and then he paused as if the next line would be something I might not have a category for) the presence of God. A God he never knew existed. It was clear to Eric in that moment that God knew him and loved him. In that moment he knew he needed more than his life currently offered.

He held that story to himself. He did not trust that people would understand. He worried that a God experience would come off as him going crazy, seeing things, hearing things. Eric did not have a context to explain a feeling of God moving in his life. He did not know how to explain to his wife, so he held it. When the Holy Spirit moves throughout scripture, things change. The Spirit disrupts. It pours out God’s love. It changes our lives in a disarming way. Eric had never considered the Holy Spirit as an active agent in the world. He had no category for the work of God, through the Holy Spirit, to further Jesus’ ministry in the world. How could he? *He had never heard Pentecost preached.*

Pentecost interrupts and transforms. With its fire and wind, it has the power to shake us, to shake the world. It even has the power to move those who do not realize their need to be shaken. These people are all around us. Many of them will not show up to worship on June 9, 2019, Pentecost Sunday. By June, our attendance starts to dip as the sun shines longer and people stop hibernating from the long, wet Seattle winter. They may not show up to worship in June, but they need Pentecost all the same.

For newcomers to the Pacific Northwest and those considering the move today,

the biggest hesitation that many have is no longer the rain, or the dark. The biggest hesitation is the Seattle freeze—a widely held belief that it is exceptionally hard to make friends in Seattle. A reporter for the *Seattle Times* writes, “Seattle is like that popular girl in high school. The one who gets your vote for homecoming queen because she always smiles and says hello. But she doesn’t know your name and doesn’t care to. She doesn’t want to be your friend. She’s just being *nice*.”<sup>2</sup> Seattle is a hard place to break into. People are very polite, yet reserved. You can live in a neighborhood and never talk to the people who live next door. You can join a class without ever talking to someone else. People in the greater Seattle area are more likely to participate in individualized activities than teams—skiing, hiking, bike riding, kayaking. People go on walks alone, drink coffee alone, read books alone. Even Millennials, who nationwide are struggling to get by financially in this new economic reality, are living alone at a much higher rate in Seattle than anywhere else in the country.<sup>3</sup> They are living alone *in Seattle*, where housing prices are skyrocketing at San Francisco rates. There is a pride in making it on our own here. “Many newcomers come to the PNW and break with their cultural or family traditions. Often, once here, the bounty of the natural environment becomes more central to their lives.”<sup>4</sup> Even among people of faith, believers in Jesus, there is little interest in belonging.

I serve a church in a particular area of the country with particular quirks and challenges, but I know that the struggles that face my congregation in a Seattle suburb are not unique. I have also served a church in the Southeast, and while not every element of Seattle is the same as Asheville or Atlanta or New York or Kansas City, or wherever in the country you find yourself, preachers face congregations with varying degrees of these elements everywhere.

People of all ages in all parts of the country are alone more and more. Stress and anxiety have grown into an epidemic among teens as they navigate a world of technology and pressure unlike anything previous generations experienced. Our oldest generation is more and more at risk for isolation, living farther away from family and trying to keep in communication with an ever-changing world. Twenty percent of people over 65 are at risk of aging alone. There is even a name for this group, coined in 2016: “elder orphans.”<sup>5</sup> In 2018, the *New York Times* alone published more than a dozen stories about rising levels of loneliness. The Seattle Freeze may be a regional phenomenon, but this creeping isolation is real throughout our world. It freezes us relationally. It stops us from knowing how to talk to one another, be with one another, interact with one another. It stands in opposition to the experience of Pentecost, where God’s Spirit begins the work of forming us as a people.

Pentecost invades our lives and our world. It assaults the isolation that we have purposely created and the isolation in which we unwittingly find ourselves. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit exposes the limitations of human connections, bringing together people who would never have otherwise spoken to one another. The Holy Spirit works a miracle by “creating a people who were ‘once not a people.’”<sup>6</sup> People are desperate for the disruption of Pentecost that binds us together in community. We need Pentecost to change things in ways we cannot even imagine.

In Acts 2, Pentecost arrives with wind and fire, strong enough to blow people out of the places where they are stuck and alone, melting what is frozen in their lives. This happens as they are filled by the Holy Spirit, with the beautifully peculiar result of tongues loosed in all kinds of languages—language of meaning, of relationship,

of connection. “The Greek verb that the NRSV translates as ‘to speak’ is *apophthegomai*, a verb that appears in the New Testament only in Acts (1:4, 14; 26:25). It means to speak solemnly, although not necessarily ecstatically.”<sup>7</sup> This solemn speaking is not grave or somber, but rather a well of sincerity. It speaks language into being that cares about things that are sacred and meaningful and mysterious and magnificent. It allows people to hear each other’s holy stories.

The podcast, *Invisibilia*, tells the story of a group of eight friends gathered around a backyard dinner table in Washington D.C., to celebrate family and friendship. Michael Rabdau, along with his wife and 14-year-old daughter were a part of the picturesque evening. Michael describes the time as “one of those great evenings—lots of food and French wine...a magical night.” After enjoying the meal and dessert, the whole group lingered, enjoying each others’ company. That is when the magical night took a different turn. Michael, who had been standing beside his wife, saw an arm with a long barrel of a gun, come between them. In that moment, he felt as if the world began moving in slow motion. Everything got quiet.

The gun belonged to a man, medium in height, wearing designer sweats, a stranger to them all. He first raised the gun toward Michael’s friend Christina and then to Michael’s wife before saying, “Give me your money.” He kept repeating the same thing over and over again, harsh and angry. “Give me your money.” Fear rose around the table. This man was not joking around.

The man’s gun was their first problem; the second was his demand. Like so many people today, not a single one of them had any cash. What he wanted, they couldn’t give. No one had any money. So...they started talking, grasping for some way to dissuade the man. They started with guilt. “What would your mother think of you?” one person asked.

“I don’t have a mother,” he replied, with a few expletives. “Give. Me. Your. Money.”

Michael remembers thinking that this was going to end badly. As everyone was filled with panic, Christina piped up with an offer. “You know, we are celebrating,” she said. “Why don’t you have a glass of wine?”

All of a sudden, the look on the man’s face changed. It was like a light switch. He took a sip of wine. “That’s a really good glass of wine,” he observed. Then he reached for the cheese and, as he did so, he placed the gun in his pocket. He drank his glass of wine. He ate more cheese. Everyone else stood there, watching, frozen in that moment.

And then the intruder said something that no one expected. “*I think I’ve come to the wrong place.*” Quickly, everyone responded with things like, “Oh, hey, yeah, I understand,” and, “Of course, this kind of thing happens.” For a moment, they all sat there with the twinkling stars overhead and the sound of chirping insects in the night. And again the intruder said something else that nobody expected. He said, “*Can I get a hug?*” It was Michael’s wife, who had a gun pointed at her just minutes earlier, who gave him a hug. And then another person from the dinner party. After those hugs, he asked, “*Can we have a group hug?*” And everyone got up and formed a circle around the man. The experience was beyond strange. When the group hug finished, he simply said, “I’m sorry,” and walked out of the front gate with a glass of wine in his hand. Later that evening, after everything had calmed down, the friends found that wine glass neatly placed on sidewalk by their alley—not thrown, not carelessly

discarded—placed.<sup>8</sup>

That group of friends experienced the new language of Pentecost, a language that broke down fear and violence. That led to apologies, and connection. Pentecost has the power to transform our communities, the gift of the Holy Spirit which points us to the promises of the resurrection.

When UCC minister Martin Copenhaver preached his last sermon at a church where he had pastored for nine years, he decided to spend almost the entire sermon speaking devotionally about Jesus. This is the conclusion of that sermon entitled “What’s It All About?”

As I am about to leave, there is something I want to tell you. I want to tell you what Jesus means to me. I want to share my belief that everything depends on him. I want to urge you to learn from him. I want to assure you that you can lean on him in times of trouble. I want to tell you that I believe that you can entrust your life to him. I want to affirm that he is Lord of this church and that in his name you are freed to love one another and empowered to share that love with a hurting world. I want to profess that, though once people could not look at the face of God and live, now we are invited to look at the face of God in him, in Jesus, and live as we have never lived before. He is Emmanuel, God with us, God with us all, whether we are together or apart. That’s what it’s all about. That’s all I know. Amen.

When the service was over, Copenhaver stood at the door of the sanctuary, shaking hands with people for the very last time as their pastor. “One woman,” he writes, “a beloved saint of the church, came to head of the line but was so overcome with emotion that she could not speak and went to the back of the line. I assumed she simply did not know how to say goodbye. When she finally reached me, she extended her hand to mine, her shocking blue eyes filled with tears. Her voice cracked as she asked, “Why didn’t you tell us this before?””<sup>9</sup>

We cannot assume that people know the power of Pentecost. We cannot assume that people know the gift of the Holy Spirit that points to the hope in Jesus. We cannot assume that people believe the Holy Spirit is coming to look for them. We cannot assume that anyone who walks into the doors of the church has been here before or will come back again. As preachers in 2019, we need to preach every sermon like it is the only sermon people will hear. We need to call on the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the promise of the resurrection. We need to remind people that God is moving in the world, now, today.

Pentecost is gift of the Holy Spirit for the insiders and the outsiders, a gift for those whose needs are desperate alongside those who do not realize they have any need. It is for pastors and wanderers and thieves and neighbors alike. Pentecost calls for a universal witness to extend the hope of Jesus to all people, in all places, and at all times. In my ministry context, I consider this call a gift and a challenge to hold in front of me with every opportunity to proclaim the Good News of Jesus.

#### Notes

1 Patricia O’Connel, Killen and Mark Silk, eds., *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The*

*None Zone* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press 2004), 9.

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4 James K. Wellman, Jr., *Evangelical vs. Liberal: The Clash of Christian Cultures in the Pacific Northwest* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2008), 190.

5 Marwa Eltagouri. "Growing Old Alone: More Seniors at Risk of Becoming Elder Orphans," *The Chicago Tribune*, December 24, 2016, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-elder-orphans-met-20161212-story.html>.

6 Stanley Hauerwas and William H Willimon, *The Holy Spirit* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press 2015), 35.

7 Justo Gonzalez, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 34-35.

8 Lulu Miller, Hanna Rosin, and Alix Spiegel, "Flip the Script," *Invisibilia*. Podcast audio, July 15, 2016 <http://www.npr.org/podcasts/510307/invisibilia>.

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