

“Gluttony and Pentecostal Generosity”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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Boom-ba-boom-ba-boom! Boom-ba-boom-boom!

Every now and then, I will be stopped at a traffic light when a car will pull up beside of me. Boom-ba-boom-ba-boom! The windows of the car are rattling. The music and sound coming out of the car is deafening. The whole road seems to be vibrating and I think to myself “How can those kids stand it inside of that car?” Now, I’m not really opposed to loud music. I have been to many concerts, and I often have my own music turned up pretty good in my own car, but all I need to do is hear it. I don’t need to feel it. Yet, this seems to be what many young people look for these days—music that they can feel, music that comes pounding out of subwoofers and rattles them to the bone. They want to feel the beat, and apparently they want you to feel it also.

Now, on Pentecost Sunday, we in the mainline Protestant church celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is thought of as the birthday of the Christian church. It is the fulfillment of prophecy. It is the answer to prayers, especially those prayers of those early followers of Jesus, and in the wake of Jesus’ death, we can only imagine that there was deep despair. How would those early followers continue without their leader? Yet, here it was on Pentecost, 50 days after Easter, that a clear sign of God’s faithfulness was revealed. Scripture tells us it was a sound like the rush of violent wind that passes through their gathering, and as it passed through, people began to speak in new and strange languages, and they began to understand what people were saying. Some were standing around, just simply amazed, wondering what in the world was going on, then people started to get baptized in mass, and they responded by worshipping, by sharing their possessions, by feasting together, and by praising God, and as Acts 2:47 says, “Day by day the Lord added to their number”. Like the thump of a subwoofer on Pentecost Sunday, they could feel the spirit. It was for real.

Now, part of our theme this morning includes the culmination of our sermon series on “The Seven Deadly Sins”. The last remaining sin of this series is gluttony. It is a word that you just have to say right—GLUTTONY! When we think of gluttony, we might immediately have visions of the all-you-can-eat buffet at Golden Corral—people bellying up to the bar for yet another helping. While gluttony certainly includes the overconsumption of food, the key phrase in the definition of gluttony is “too much”—too much food, too much drink, too much sex, too much stuff. To be gluttonous is to be insatiably greedy at the expense of your neighbor and yourself.

In 1960, a young man by the name of Millard Fuller graduated from the University of Alabama Law School in Tuscaloosa and, upon graduation, Millard Fuller and a buddy of his began a marketing firm, and Fuller’s business expertise and entrepreneurial drive made him a millionaire by the age of 29. He was rich and taking the world by storm, but in the process of his well-earned success something began to happen to Millard. He began to grow fat. He started to develop some health concerns. His moral and ethical integrity became compromised, and his marriage to his high school sweetheart began to suffer. Indeed, by his early 30s, Millard Fuller’s life was in crisis. As the story goes, in the midst of this crisis, Fuller and his wife, Linda, found themselves one day in a New York City taxi cab. They were driving around the city, around the city, around the city, trying to salvage their marriage and their lives, and the Holy Spirit entered in. The emptiness of their souls, which could not be filled with earthly belongings and success, started to get filled up with a renewed commitment to God. They were not happy with their gluttony. It didn’t speak to their souls. It, in fact, emptied their souls.

In that conversation, and in subsequent conversations, Millard and Linda began to talk “What should we do? What do you do when the Holy Spirit comes into your life?” Well, you start talking about it, so they

began to talk. They decided that they would sell all of their possessions, they would give their money to the poor, they would settle in America's Georgia, and they would eventually begin a housing ministry that would become known as Habitat For Humanity.

Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit, can happen anywhere, at any time, in any place, even in a taxi cab. So, Millard and Linda were struggling. They were in despair. They were at a loss for how to live their lives. Even though they had all this worldly success, it didn't speak to their spirits. Despair and struggle, pain and longing seem to be opportunities through which the Holy Spirit of God can enter into our lives again. When we are in pain, when we are struggling for meaning, when we are sad about the circumstances of our lives, there is an opening through which God can enter. This is good news—not simply for our own individual lives, but for our lives together as people of faith.

At that first Christian Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is poured out upon the community of believers. The Holy Spirit is not primarily a personal gift from God that we privatize as if some have it and some don't, but the Spirit of God appears among them. It appears among them as a distinguished mark of a people who belong to God—a distinguishing mark of a people who belong to God. That is what happens when the Holy Spirit hits us. We start to have a self-consciousness that we are God's people, called to do tremendous things. When the Spirit hit this first gathering, all of a sudden they can hear one another in each one's language. They can kind of hear over the barriers that separate them, and they reach out to one another, and they share with one another, and they praise God with one another, and they are filled now with God's Spirit, and their temptations of gluttony and despair have been replaced by a holy generosity and joy. They are filled with a new spirit that says "Let us be joyful. Let us be a different kind of community".

Now, we live in a world that is very cynical as to whether there can ever be any newness, and we worship now within a declining faith tradition that is even more cynical in some ways than the world. I sit together with other pastors once a month, and it always gets to the conversation of "Oh, our churches are doing so badly. They are dying". Isn't that terrible? Pentecost calls us to change that discussion because we have forgotten, and we don't even believe anymore that God can do a new thing. What Pentecost says is, God is always doing a new thing. Get ready because God is going to shake things up. God has got new things for us to do.

Pentecost reminds us that God's work is never done, that the Holy Spirit can re-enter our lives and our churches and our world at any moment and that the only requirement for this to happen is for us to be open, for us to believe that, yes, God is still at work in this world, God is still at work in my life, God is still at work in Peace Church and God is still at work in this neighborhood. I am waiting for God to change my life, and I want God to change my life. That's all we've got to do—be open to that Spirit, because the promise of scripture is that God is out of the box, and we are always tempted to put God in a box, but God is out there moving in the world.

We are called on Pentecost, once again, to be open to new possibilities, to have faith that God is not done with us yet and to have the courage to let go of what has been and is no more, and to be ready for what is coming and shall be. Scripture promises us that God is doing a new thing and calls us to be open to whatever that might be. So, when those first followers had gathered there on that day of Pentecost and had been "zapped" by the Holy Spirit, they turned to each other (if you picked it up in scripture) and said "What does this mean?" and Peter quotes the prophet Joel and says "What this means is, the day of the Lord is coming"; that is, "The Great Divine clean up of the world has begun and I need you to be a part of it"; that is, "God needs us to be a part of rebuilding the world".

So, Pentecost challenges us to get back to work, to be open to newness that is coming, and to make a commitment again that we have a mission to bring this unbelievable love, a love of God that breaks down the barriers between all people, and brings them together. On this Pentecost Sunday, we are challenged by God to be Pentecost people—people of the Spirit. Give thanks to those early Christians who heard and felt the Spirit, and we commit ourselves to new vision. Amen.