

“In the Spirit”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
June 8, 2014

Good morning once again. How many of you would like to admit to being filled with too much wine this morning? Nobody? Some people are chuckling. I want to start today by taking us back to a “filled with wine” kind of moment, when the Holy Spirit touched a piece of our history in the United Church of Christ. It takes us all the way back to August of 1806.

In August of 1806, in Williamstown, Massachusetts, there were five students from Williams College, who gathered in a farmer’s field called Sloan’s Meadow. They gathered there to discuss the spiritual welfare of the people of Asia. They were having a discussion about mission and taking God’s word to foreign lands. This meeting led, within six years, to the sending of the first American missionaries to India and, later on, missionaries were sent to China, to Hawaii and to other nations in Southeast Asia. These missionaries were sent to start hospitals, schools and a variety of mission outposts throughout Asia. One of the other things that they also did was they translated the Bible into indigenous languages so that the folks there could understand and read God’s word in their own language.

From that gathering in the field, thousands of missionaries have gone out over the years to serve, to spread God’s word, and to sort of be a healing presence in foreign lands, but it all began on that August day in 1806 when these five students gathered in a farmer’s field. While they gathered there, they gathered to discuss, and apparently to debate, a theology of mission when their meeting in that field was interrupted by a quick, yet severe, thunderstorm. In trying to get out of the way of that thunderstorm, they decided that they would hide underneath a haystack. As the rain poured down, and as the sky lit up with lightning and as the thunder roared all around them, these five students were jolted by the Holy Spirit. God, they felt, had intruded upon their meeting. God, they felt, had given them shelter and protection from this storm, and God had called out to them to spread the word to far-away lands. This event is referred to as The Haystack Prayer Event, and our mission work to this very day is indebted to these five students who got “zapped” by God on that day.

I tell you that story because this type of story, and this story of Pentecost, is what we are about in the church. We are about the coming of God’s spirit in surprising ways and at surprising moments in our lives, and today being Pentecost, we are to remember that event and to reflect upon it for what it meant to the early church and, more importantly, on what it means for us today.

There are four innovations that I have drawn from this Pentecost story. The first begins with that first verse from Acts 2, Verse 1. It says “when the day of Pentecost had come”, and the implication here is that Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit was a fulfillment of prophecy – that these early followers of Jesus were somehow waiting for something to happen. They were expecting God to intrude in their lives. They didn’t know when, they didn’t know how, they didn’t know where, but they were waiting for God to intervene in their lives. Remember, these folks had just lost Jesus. We can only imagine that they were sort of like an empty balloon. They were not filled with open expectation but perhaps with sadness. What were they going to do now that Jesus was dead, Jesus was gone, and the leader of their new religious movement was no longer there? You can imagine that they were probably sad and wondering what was next for them, so the Spirit comes and there is hope for this new movement. Something has happened here that we were not totally ready for, so the story gets some energy.

Continuing on in that verse, it says “they were all together in one place”. Like us, they were gathered together. The power of that line is that God’s Spirit is poured out upon a community of believers. God’s Spirit does not simply come to us as individuals. God’s Spirit comes down on the community of faith and gives it

energy and transforms our lives. It is a Spirit that comes into the early church. It comes into the church of the day and says you are my people, you are filled with my Spirit, go and change this world and they are on fire with the Spirit. They are no longer alone in their journey. They are no longer alone in their hopelessness. They are now filled with hope, and they see all around them is a community to walk with and to give them hope and courage.

Now, this Spirit looks down on this community of believers and it becomes a distinguishing mark for this community. After the Spirit touches them, people start to recognize that they are a little bit different, that they have changed, and that people out there in the world see them and they notice. We have people in our lives who we recognize as different, people we are drawn to, those people in our lives who we just like to be around because they are filled with God's peace, and that is what the Holy Spirit in that early church did. It sort of marked them off as different, and they had an attraction for lots of people because somehow they were not shaped by this world.

In Verse 6 of Acts 2, it reads "and at this sound the crowd gathered". They heard something with this Holy Spirit. They heard something that they really wanted to look into. It sounded, perhaps, strange. It sounded powerful, but they needed to go and find out what that sound was. So, this early coming of the Holy Spirit was apparently a noisy affair. This was a rowdy event. It was drawing people in for all the noise that was happening at that moment. The verse says "People from every nation were amazed". The doors of the church are opened when the Holy Spirit is present. When the Holy Spirit comes in, the doors fly open and new people come through, so the Spirit is a moment of newness. For that early church and for the church today, when the Spirit is present, the doors are opened. People are listening, they are attracted and they want to come in and say "What's going on in that church?"

This morning, I went to Harris-Teeter very early to get these red balloons. I went to the little area where they do the cakes and the balloons and so forth, and there were two gentlemen blowing up balloons. One of them turned to me and asked "What do you do with red balloons in church?". I said "It's Pentecost. It's the coming of the Holy Spirit". He didn't know about that. He didn't know that the Holy Spirit is moving in Peace Church. He didn't know about the Christian event of Spirit moving and changing the world. I said to him "Come and join us sometime and you'll see it, but you've got to get Sundays off".

Lastly, in Verse 4 it says "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages". The Holy Spirit comes, and it demands proclamation. When we are filled with the Spirit, we want to go out and tell people about this Spirit which is turning things upside down. We're so excited that we've got to tell somebody, and we can tell it to people we never even told it to before, people who speak a different language from us, people who have a different experience of life from us, and people who look different from us. We can go out, and we can talk to them and invite them in when we are filled with the Spirit.

So, the questions for us on Pentecost Sunday are: What do we expect from God? What are we longing for in our lives? What are our hopes for God to do in and through Peace Church? What do we want to happen?

I love that scene in the movie "The Apostle". If you've ever seen that movie, Robert De Niro is arguing with God. He's a preacher, an evangelist and is upstairs arguing with God. You can hear the argument. You don't know it's with God. You think it is maybe with his girlfriend or wife, but he's arguing with God. It's a great scene of someone having expectations of God.

We are to be filled with expectations. What is it that would be our distinguishing mark? How will people identify us when we are filled with the Holy Spirit? How will people look at us and say "Oh yeah, THOSE people"?

I'll tell you, one time I was at the General Synod for the United Church of Christ, and I was standing out on a

balcony looking down on all the people of the United Church of Christ from all walks of life, all different states around the United States, all the missionaries from different parts of the world, all different colors, in all different traditional clothing and such. I looked down there and I said “You know what? We are the church of merry misfits”. We are the church of merry misfits because we are filled with the spirit, and we know that we are all a part of that body.

Last, but not least, on Pentecost we celebrate new folks coming into the church, so Pentecost is a day of joy, a day of renewed hope, and it is a day of transformation and proclamation, and my sense is that the Holy Spirit is, indeed, alive and well in Peace Church and that God has wonderful new things in store for us and that, with the Spirit as a guide, as OUR guide, we can go forth and we can proclaim, proclaim God’s love, invite new folks in, and be transformed by the life of Jesus Christ, so let us truly be God’s Holy Spirit people. Amen.