



“The Impolite Spirit”

Rev. Dr. Michael L. Gregg

May 20, 2018

Acts 2:1-21

We’ve seen this all before, haven’t we? We know the parade and the pageantry. We know the flowing streamers and the tall banner. We know the brightly colored attire and the flaming red paraments draped on our chancel. We know there will be sounds of blowing breezes and rushing winds. We know there will be a floating of a peaceful dove. We know there will be flickering tongues of fire alighted on the tops of heads. We know languages will be spoken, ears will be opened, and the day will be filled with celebration for the birthday of the church. We’ve experienced this day time and time again.

And just like all major festival days, one challenge of preaching Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost lies in their familiarity. With familiarity comes the domestication of scripture’s most unruly, unusual, uncontrollable stories. One commentator writes that “incarnation, resurrection, and the outpouring of God’s Holy Spirit upon all flesh find themselves toned down into quiet images of a baby in a manger, a bunny with a basket, and a burning breeze that swept through some distant place in a distant age, leaving perhaps only a trace of its passage among our own people in our own time.”

And that is what we experience in the Pentecost text for today. Our polite imaginations have left us little energy to truly understand the narrative uproar of this story. As we consider historic works of art or google online images about the moment the Spirit empowered the church, we are mainly left with small, polite tongues of fire dancing through a comfortable room or resting, as unobtrusively as is possible for fire, upon the heads of people calmly sitting in their precise places. The English translation of the text also underplays the “fear-inducing, adrenalin-pumping, wind-tossed, fire-singed, smoke-filled turmoil of that experience.” Those who observed this Pentecost visitation were described with benign terms such as “bewildered” in verse 6, “amazed and astonished” in verse 7, and “amazed and perplexed” in verse 12.

However, after reading various commentaries and exploring several Greek lexicons, the terms describing the reactions of the witnessing people should be appropriately translated as significantly more... impolite. Those who experienced the power of the Spirit were actually “confused, in an uproar, beside themselves, undone, blown away, thoroughly disoriented, completely uncomprehending.” The impolite spirit had shattered and upended their lives. It’s important to release this story from its domestication. The Spirit of Pentecost and the Power of God connects us to some of scripture’s most primal, disorderly, prophetic roots. And our text today opens doors into a liberating, destructive, unconstrained, and impolite Spirit of God.

But where did Pentecost come from? The word “Pentecost” is derived from the Greek word for fifty, *pente*. The celebration of Pentecost was seven weeks after Passover on the 50th

day. Pentecost, before it was a Christian high holy day, was originally the Jewish Festival of Weeks known as Shavuot. Shavuot is described in detail in the 23rd chapter of Leviticus, which reads: “And from the day after the sabbath, from the day on which you bring the sheaf of the elevation-offering, you shall count off seven weeks; they shall be complete. You shall count until the day after the seventh sabbath, fifty days; then you shall present an offering of new grain to the Lord.” Then it talks about the fruit offerings, drink offerings, and animal offerings given to the Lord during Shavuot. But it’s at the end of this passage in Leviticus where the description of Pentecost becomes extremely important. The text continues, “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God.”

Did you catch that? The most important part of the celebration of Pentecost and the adherence to Shavuot is to recognize that the Leviticus passage moves directly from thankfulness and worship to justice. The text moves from the long discussion of what kind of harvest offering to bring to the ethical demand not to harvest the fields to their fullest extent, but to leave the edges for the poor. This was important because the landless would often follow behind the harvesters in order to pick up what had been dropped or to glean what had been left on the stalk. Leviticus 23 is one of several places where the privileged people were to leave dropped bundles on the ground, were not to harvest all the way to the edges, were not to beat olive trees or strip grape vines completely, because they were to remember that they were once poor and landless and hopeless and wandering and God had given the land to them. They, therefore, were to consider their fields, their trees, and their vineyards as a means of their prophetic witness and a way of providing for the poor and needy.

And I hope we recognize today that Pentecost isn’t merely a fun celebration of doves, bright colors, and beautiful music. Pentecost is a windy, destructive strength that formed the first church and is currently reforming and remaking the church of today. And that furious and destructive power beckons us back to Leviticus and reminds us that Pentecost was essentially a call for justice for those who needed to be lifted out of scarcity and slavery. And Pentecost today reminds us of our abundance and our freedom and our privilege and that it obligates us to protect and provide for those who continue to live in poverty, in desperation, and in chains.

And as the Spirit of Pentecost blows through our homes, our churches, and our lives, as it destroys our ivory towers, our structures of privilege, our falsely secure fences, we see that the impolite Spirit doesn’t play by the rules. The impolite Spirit upends us and calls us to be prophets in the world. During his Pentecost speech, Peter claimed that an untamed spirit had spurred prophets from the beginning of time. Peter began his sermon by quoting the prophet Joel, through whom God spoke in ways that overturned human categories, distinctions, and established roles. And as prophets of Pentecost, we too must sometimes bring a mighty wind and forceful fire into the comfortable and complacent places of the world.

We must be Pentecostal prophets because this world is not as it should be, and we need to name that out loud and often. The world is not as it should be because our kids are safer away from school than in their school. The world is not as it should be because one percent of the people hold all of wealth and power. The world is not as it should be because we as Americans have the luxury to not care about the environment when poorer nations in Africa suffer drought and

famine due to our negligence. The world is not as it should be when we can treat people like animals and claim that people are animals, rather than look in the mirror and confront our own prejudices and fears. The world is not as it should be.

And sometimes the pain of a not as it should be world is unbearable and we long for a Pentecostal prophet like Joel, or Peter, or Jesus to come along and fix it all for us. But that is not how the biblical challenge goes. We are called to be people who hope in a forever creating and in a forever redeeming God. We are called to be people who don't just believe that God is always plotting goodness, but also that we are invited and blessed to join God in that work. The work to be done is a divine-human partnership. Now, during Pentecost, is the time to wake up to that calling and embrace the invitation to be a prophetic people who follow not a tame and impotent Spirit, but a bold, a destructive, and an impolite Spirit.

That is to say, the more we work to make God's world as it should be, each time we sense the Spirit in our breath, in our hands, in our feet, in our words, and the further we walk on the Way of Christ Jesus, the more disenchanted we should be with the broken systems of our world, and the more compelled we should become to work with God to make something new, and bold, and just in this old place. This prophetic and Pentecostal process is not easy or simple. And following the impolite Spirit can be very difficult. But we are to remember the words of Leviticus which remind us that Pentecost pushes us from thankfulness to justice.

My good friend and colleague, Pastor Elizabeth Lott at St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church in New Orleans says, "We must expend less energy being polite and more energy being prophetic. If so, we will use our voices for truth-telling and speaking to power, we will be kind in all things but will not avoid hard conversations. Our words, our silence, our prayers, our efforts, our gatherings here and our lives out there will be about the work that our forever creating God is already doing and invites us to join."

The day of Pentecost is here and we called to join in. But if we're going to join in, we mustn't be satisfied with a polite spirit. We mustn't be satisfied with timid flickering flames. We mustn't be satisfied with a tender dove. We mustn't be satisfied with a gentle breeze. No, the time for being polite is over. The time for being quiet is over. The time for being comfortable is over. The time for being simply amused and amazed is over. Now is the time to be prophetic. To declare justice, like Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., that all can dream dreams. To declare hope, like Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and pronounce power to a persecuted people. To declare liberation, like Archbishop Oscar Romero, and denounce poverty, assassinations, and torture. To declare, like the prophets of old, that the time has come for us to bring a mighty wind through this world, light a mighty flame through this world, spark a mighty inclusion in the voices and languages of the people in this world.

And, I'm sure, just like in the early stages of the church, there will be such turmoil that some would suppose we are out of our minds, that we are crazy, that we are angry, that we are too passionate, that we are too political. But just like Simon Peter had to interpret for the crowd what was occurring, saying they were not indeed drunk and that the prophecy of Joel was being fulfilled, today I am here to tell us that the Spirit of the Christian church, the Spirit of Royal Lane, the Spirit of God can no longer be polite. God is pouring out God's spirit upon God's

people and if we are telling the story correctly, we should be impolite and we should be prophets, and we should join with the Spirit of God to set people free!

I didn't intend to watch the Royal Wedding yesterday, but when you live with Amanda, Annaleigh, and Beatrice, tiaras and teacups are normal fixtures in our home. The girls squealed with glee when the flower girls and page boys piled out of fancy cars. Amanda drooled over Meghan Markle's simple and elegant gown. I think she might've been drooling over the handsome Prince Harry, too. But for me, the highlight of the wedding was the homily given by Bishop Michael Curry. Although he is Episcopalian, he surely preached a Pentecostal sermon. As the descendant of an African slave, he stood in front of a monarchy that enslaved his ancestors and spoke of true power. And that true power is love. Love is power according to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Bishop Curry preached about how if love is powerful then it cannot be tamed. And if love is powerful then love can change the world.

Bishop Curry wanted us to imagine a world where love can change everything. "Think and imagine a world where love is the way. Imagine our homes and families when love is the way. Imagine neighborhoods and communities where love is the way. Imagine governments and nations where love is the way. Imagine business and commerce when love is the way. Imagine this tired old world when love is the way, unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive. When love is the way, then no child will go to bed hungry in this world ever again. When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook. When love is the way, poverty will become history. When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary. When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields down, down by the riverside to study war no more. When love is the way, there's plenty good room, plenty good room, for all of God's children. Because when love is the way, we actually treat each other, well, like we are actually family. When love is the way, we know that God is the source of us all and we are brothers and sisters, children of God. My brothers and sisters, that's a new heaven, a new earth, a new world, a new human family. And let me tell you something, old Solomon was right in the Old Testament, that's fire." And then Bishop Curry went on to say that if humanity ever harnesses the energy of fire again, if humanity ever captures the energy of love, it will be the second time in history that we have discovered fire.

The God of Justice, the God of Love is on the loose and is on fire. And the Spirit of Pentecost is calling us to no longer be polite but to be prophetic. How we long for the mighty tide of God to roll in once more. How we long for the impolite Spirit to move through us and bring the Pentecostal power of change to the world. "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Pentecost is about justice for all of God's people. It is about power for all of God's people. It is about love for all of God's people. Let us go from here as Pentecostal persons who leave the platitudes and the placations and even our patience behind in order to follow out into the world the prophetically impolite Spirit of God.

Amen.