

Pentecost  
Acts 2:1-11  
May 9, 2009

We've been in Acts for so many weeks now, I was afraid by now I would have exhausted absolutely all there is to say about Pentecost, and the Holy Spirit which we know by now, if we didn't know it before, descended on the disciples, as tongues of fire and a strong, blustery wind. There is at least one aspect of Pentecost we haven't considered yet, though, hallelujah! and that is the **Presbyterian** take on Pentecost. I thought that would be a good place to start our discussion this morning.

In your bulletin you have an insert and on that insert is a picture of the founder of the Presbyterian Church, John Calvin. He's the one with the sour expression on his face and the pointy beard. Just so you don't think, "Well, he just looks that way, because that's the way people looked back then," I've also included in that insert a picture of Martin Luther. That way you can do a comparison. Martin Luther and John Calvin were near contemporaries. Martin Luther was only about 20 years older than John Calvin. However, as is evident from the pictures, there is quite a contrast between the two men, despite the fact that they lived in the same historical time period. Martin Luther loved his food, and as a good German, I've read that he also loved his beer. He was outgoing and I think it is safe to say that if you were to meet him you would find him a hail fellow well met. He would be a good person to invite to a party. Martin Luther was a former monk. He caused something of a scandal when he fell in love with and married a former nun. Calvin on the other hand, bordered on the ascetic and from the looks of it, maybe he may have also bordered on the anorexic. He was a task master. He was rigid in his dealings with people. He was trained in the law and his whole life he kept a lawyer mentality. Invite HIM to a party and he would probably sit in a corner the whole night through, perhaps trapping some poor soul into listening to his arguments regarding politics or religion. John Calvin married but only as a practicality. It was bad form to be an unmarried protestant pastor in Geneva in the 1500's.

Still, even though we may poke fun at John Calvin, he gave us our Presbyterian form of government, a "from the grassroots up" representative, democratic form of government. It's the Presbyterian form of government which was later adopted by our nation's founders, by the way. So, we **American** Presbyterians particularly owe a lot to John Calvin.

Knowing what I do about John Calvin's personality, I had a hunch that he would not have much good to say about Pentecost. Any holiday that is about letting loose a little would not be to John Calvin's liking. However, in my research this week, I couldn't find anything to support my suspicions. I DID read, though, that John Calvin tried to outlaw Christmas. So maybe I am half right, after all. You heard right. In Geneva, where he not only pastored, but where he also ran the city, John Calvin tried to outlaw Christmas. For his anti-Christmas sentiments, he was exiled from Geneva—Exiled that is until the Genevans realized that Calvin, as acerbic as he might be, was an extremely capable leader. Without Calvin at the helm, the city quickly devolved into chaos. Eventually he and the Genevans struck a compromise. He was allowed to return to Geneva, however Geneva was allowed to keep its Christmas. True story.

But I don't want to talk about Christmas. I want to talk about Pentecost and the holy spirit. I hope what I just said is a fair lead in for us to talk about the very delicate balance we must maintain in our lives and also in our worship—the delicate balance between the Holy Spirit and order, between the unpredictable and the predictable, and between risk and safety. Definitely John Calvin erred on the side of order, predictability and safety—and that has come down to us, good Presbyterians that we are. Do you know that Presbyterians are sometimes referred to as the “Frozen Chosen?” Our will for order and predictability and safety sometimes comes at a price—it comes at the expense of the Holy Spirit.

Carl Jung, the famed psychiatrist of the last century, was ambivalent about the existence of the Holy Spirit, even though his father was a pastor in the Swiss Reformed Church, or really, the Swiss Presbyterian Church. Carl Jung says that if there is indeed a Holy Spirit (which, again, he wasn't sure that there is), we humans, and I would add here, especially PRESBYTERIAN humans, allow very little space at all for it to enter into our lives, so caught up are we in maintaining order in our lives. The only chance the Holy Spirit has to really influence us, speak to us, breathe into us, is during our dream time—that time when our defenses are down. It was his feeling, then, that we would do well to listen to what our dreams may be trying to tell us.

As it is in our waking lives, so it can be in worship, especially Presbyterian worship. Most Presbyterian pastors, including this Presbyterian pastor, are on the side of control in worship, rather than on the side of making space for the unpredictable Holy Spirit. After all, too much space can lead to chaos and the pastor can be criticized for being disorganized or a poor planner.

This week I read a brief account by a pastor (and I don't know whether he was Presbyterian or not—sorry) who officiated at the funeral of a Frenchman. As might be expected, the funeral was attended by friends and family members who were also French. After the service, one of the mourners shook the pastor's hand and said, "Thank you pastor. I appreciate the mess." The pastor beat himself up for many days after that. Certainly he might have done a better job with the eulogy, but the service wasn't a total MESS, was it?" Sometime later a pastor colleague shed some light on what that person had probably meant to say. If she was French, no doubt she was Catholic, therefore, she probably meant to say, "I appreciate the mass—in French, the word for mass is la messe.

Despite the fact that I am a Presbyterian pastor, and who therefore leans toward order in worship, you know my favorite part of our worship service? It is the sharing of our celebrations and concerns. That is the one totally unplanned part our Sunday morning time together, and by gumbo, if the holy spirit has any opportunity to enter in, that's the place in our service it will choose to do it! I have a running argument with an Episcopalian priest friend of mine who is big on church liturgy. She thinks that the sharing of celebrations and concerns in worship is risky business. "You never know what someone might say," she opines. "That is exactly the point," I answer back.

She almost proved me wrong one Sunday though. It was several years ago, at my previous call, where I served as an associate pastor. I want to end the sermon today with that story.

On the last Sunday before Christmas, you know, that Sunday when a lot of people who you don't see anytime else during the church year, come back to worship? That Christmas Sunday the sanctuary was packed with folks wanting to hear a message of good tidings and joy--which they did during the sermon anyway. But after the sermon came the celebrations and concerns. Dum de dum dum. A relatively new member of the church, Jean, stood up to celebrate a turning point in her life. That celebration was the fact that after several years of struggle, her depression had finally lifted. It was obvious to all of us sitting in the pews, however, that Jean still was not well. Otherwise, she would not have done what she did. She walked up to the front of the sanctuary and read to us page after page of a written account she had prepared the night before. It was an account of her struggle with depression. As she read, she interrupted her own discourse, alternately laughing and weeping, giddy perhaps from too much caffeine and too little sleep.

The preacher that Sunday, my boss, stood at the pulpit and the congregation sat in their pews, in stunned silence—for 10 minutes, maybe more, while Jean read on and on, and on. Her depression, we gathered from her reading, was caused by the loss of her 21

year old daughter. That daughter had simply disappeared. The family had filed a missing person's report, visited the daughter's college, talked to her friends, all to no end. The daughter's car was eventually discovered near the Canadian border, stripped of valuables and then set on fire. That discovery led the police to conclude that the daughter had died, her death the result of foul play. The daughter's body was never recovered. Jean and her husband were so haunted by sad memories, they could no longer live in the same house, or even in the same town. They moved to McLean. That is how they came to attend our church. This was news to all of us in the congregation, even those of us who thought we knew Jean fairly well.

Good Tidings and Joy? Certainly not. At the fellowship hour following the service, we ate our Christmas cookies and drank our Christmas punch in silence. People didn't know whether to hug Jean or smack her. To put it mildly, it had been a "messy" service, and it was NOT appreciated. I could imagine my Episcopalian priest friend wagging her finger at me. "See, I told you so."

A week later, the congregation received a notice in the newsletter. A memorial service was in the works for Jean's daughter. The service had been scheduled for such and such a day and time. On a cold January afternoon, I drove to the church, to attend the memorial service of a young woman I had never met. I went to support a hurting family and I went because I suspected I would be one of the few mourners in attendance; But you know, I was wrong? That cold January day was filled to overflowing! In fact you might say it was Christmas all over again. Or maybe better, you might say it was Pentecost. The holy spirit had found a space to enter in.

May it be so for you as for me. Amen