

A Pentecost 5.28.23

Acts 2:1-21

Focus Statement: The Holy Spirit is alive and active

Thursday morning, I was driving back to the office after a meeting, and I stopped at the library to return a book in the book drop. When I pulled up, there was a car parked at the drop, and it wasn't moving. Because the driver of the car had her cane stuck in the book drop. I'll be honest, at first I was super annoyed by this. This was supposed to be a quick thing, just drop the book off, get to church, and write this sermon. I had a million things to do Thursday, and I didn't really want to spend a lot of time waiting to drop off a library book. But as I sat there and watched this woman struggle with her cane, and pondered if I should go and dislodge the cane so she could leave, I caught a glimpse of her face in her sideview mirror. And I realized, part of the reason she was struggling so much to get her cane out is she was laughing absolutely uncontrollably at the ridiculousness of having one's cane stuck out one's open car window in the book drop. And the more I watched her, I admit, the more I started to laugh. Because, let's face it, this was funny. She finally opened her car door for a bit of a different angle and managed to dislodge her cane from the book drop. But she continued to sit there because she was laughing too hard to drive away. And by this point I too am laughing, and in way better spirits than I was when I pulled into the library parking lot with a laundry list of things to do running through my head. And, even better, I had the shape of this sermon starting to form. Because, it occurred to me, that this was the Holy Spirit at work. Not getting one's cane stuck in the book drop, but the initial ingenuity of "I can't get the book to drop, and I can't reach it, what could be a solution to this problem... Oh, my cane!" Like, that's some creativity right there, that's some out of the

box thinking. And then, when the aforementioned cane gets wedged in the book drop, the joy that followed, that too was the Spirit.

So it's Pentecost Sunday today, a day one of the commentaries I was reading pointed out has an outsized place in our worship and theological imaginations for an event that takes up exactly four verses in the entirety of scripture. Four verses, that's it, just Acts two one through four. Five if you count the one line of John where Jesus "breathed on them and said 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" This is not a big story in scripture. The commentary I was reading remarked that part of the reason why the coming of the Holy Spirit is so brief is because we're not meant to focus on the event itself, but on the effect the coming of the Spirit has on the community's mission to the world. This tiny little group of followers who were, depending on if you're reading John or Acts, either locked away in a room in fear or at best hanging out in Jerusalem waiting for further instructions, suddenly becomes this worldwide movement, fulfilling the exact mission Jesus had set them on in last week's reading from the first chapter of Acts, to be his witnesses "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The sermon podcast I listen to quoted an article by an Acts scholar. The article was titled "Pentecost as a Recurrent Theme." The article's argument was that there is not just one Pentecost event in Acts but many, because Pentecost is not history, it's not the one time the Spirit came down in tongues of fire on twelve guys. Rather Pentecost is "times where God breaks in through the Spirit and sets the church on a new course of travel or a new discovery about what God is making possible because of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. [There is] this patterning in Acts that every now and then the Spirit will show up and create a bit of chaos

or wonder or confusion or new opportunity.” Matthew Skinner, the podcast guy, goes on to remark that the story in Acts two is really the “first of many Pentecost moments” that take place throughout the book of Acts, Paul’s letters, and really the life of the church.

You may have noticed the theme for worship this morning is surprise and chaos. I’m trying to create as many opportunities for the Spirit to show up and mess around with us a little. So we’re going to do a thing now that the introverts in the room are going to hate, and you extroverts are going to eat up. Introverts, I hear you, I’m one of you, I would hate this activity, I’m sorry. If you’re an extrovert seated near an introvert, be kind. That disclaimer aside, here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to take the next three minutes, I’ve got my phone, I’ll run a timer, and I want you to talk to each other, just whoever’s around you, about where you saw God this week. Council members, we start every meeting this way, so you’ve got an advantage here, you can demonstrate. These don’t have to be long stories, they can be a phone call from a friend or a tree that you noticed just budded out or someone got their cane stuck in the book drop at the library. Alright, ready? Three minutes. Go.

How was that? Fun? Scary? Little of both? If that was hard, don’t worry, we’re going to keep practicing this. This is how we’re going to start worship throughout the summer. Instead of a thanksgiving for baptism or confession and forgiveness, we’re going to spend the summer opening our worship by sharing places we saw God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, at work in the world and our lives. Why are we doing this? Because you see what you’re

looking for. You see what you're looking for. If you're looking for God the world, you'll start to see God. You can train your eyes to be on the lookout for the Spirit's presence blowing through everything, but it takes practice. So we're going to practice.

One more thing before I let you go. Let's jump back to John really quick and take a look at those last verses. "Then [Jesus] breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'" This responsibility of forgiving and retaining sins seems like a lot of power to give to the church, especially since, if we're honest, the church over its two-thousand-year history has not always had the best track record of doing stuff all that well. Christendom as an institution has made some mistakes, to put it mildly. So it's helpful in reading this verse to remember that sin in John's Gospel is not a behavior or an action. Sin in John's Gospel is not recognizing or being in relationship with Jesus. With that in mind, I've started to hear this verse not as a "you get to decide who does and does not get forgiveness" invitation for a power trip, but rather as encouragement and challenge. If you forgive the sins of any, if you help to rebuild the relationship between God and God's people, if you share the good news of a God loves this world so much that God sent God's only Son to walk around it in, in the flesh, to die so that death might be defeated, to rise again in accordance with the scriptures, and who, upon returning to the Father, sends us another Advocate, who will be with us forever and will be in us, to bring us joy and peace and hope and direction and, yes, as Matt Skinner pointed out, a little bit of chaos and confusion, and also wonder and new opportunity. If you, if we don't share this good news, who will? The stories of God's grace and peace and joy and transformational life-giving presence in our lives won't get told if we

don't tell them. Dear people of God, Pentecost challenges us to be witnesses of the Spirit in the world. To have our eyes and ears, hearts and minds open for all of the amazing and surprising ways in which Jesus through the Holy Spirit just keep showing up in the world, and to tell the stories of the things we have seen. So, dear people of God, as was written in the words of the prophet Joel, the Spirit of God has been poured out on all flesh, be prophets, be tellers of truth, to the wonder and glory and holy and joyous chaos of God's presence in the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.