

Acts 2:1–21, 40–42 (NRSV)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

‘In the last days it will be, God declares,

that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” So those who welcomed his message were

baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

From Eleven to Three Thousand

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: June 8, 2014 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Acts 2:1-21, 40-42

And that day three thousand were added. Fifty days after Easter, less than two months from those awful events of Holy Week—that horrid Thursday and Friday, in an instant, really, the Christian church went from eleven remaining disciples to several thousand members. Three thousand were baptized and joined the church on Pentecost alone. From storefront to mega-church in a matter of weeks.

For our struggling little churches this story may fill us with envy. As we struggle to meet budgets, as we watch numbers dwindle, as we make difficult decisions going into an unknown future, baptizing three thousand in a day sounds delicious. This place holds maybe a hundred and fifty if we packed it like sardines. What would that make it, twenty services on Sunday just to handle the crowds. We'd need traffic cops. We'd need off-site parking. My goodness, we'd need a church bus!

But before our imaginations run too far, maybe we would look back to that first Pentecost with a bit of suspicion, too. Three thousand baptisms? Talk about repetitive stress injury. Biblical scholars have vigorously debated the reliability of the numbers. Detractors point to population estimates and the logistical nightmare of three thousand baptisms and then three thousand at communion. Supporters have pointed to Jesus' feeding of the five thousand as evidence of the disciples' experience with crowd control. But I think there is one assertion that we can all agree makes the story suspect. The Bible says they all got along famously. Thousands of new members, and everybody loved everybody else. Right. Anyone who has been in a church for more than ten minutes knows that can't be true.

Joking aside, I don't think anyone knows the true numbers of converts that Pentecost. We know the Biblical writers often used large numbers to convey something spectacular. We don't know the numbers. But we do know this. Focusing on the facts often fails to see the phenomenal. Concentrating on history often misses the mystery.

Many years ago I was at a sunrise service. The preacher wanted to prove beyond a doubt that Jesus died and was then raised. First, he wanted us to understand that Jesus died. He wasn't just wounded. He wanted to address those who might say that Jesus was taken down from the cross alive and then nursed back to health. He could prove Jesus was dead, the preacher said, because when you stick a spear into the side of a dead man blood and water come out, just like it says in John. If the man is just alive, only blood will come out. Has something to do with the way fluids settle in the body at death. I don't recall what gruesome details the preacher used to prove Jesus' resurrection. I was too sick to my stomach to listen. Despite the preacher's obvious pride, holiness did not reside in the preacher's harangue about the hole in Jesus' side. There was no theology in the preacher's lesson in biology. The mystery of the resurrection is not explained bodily fluid inspection.

And the mystery of Pentecost is not found in explaining or debunking the numbers of converts on that day. It's not explained by the fact that the earliest church found a way to move people that we wish we had today. The mystery of Pentecost is found in the way the Holy Spirit works, the way the Holy Spirit draws people to itself and infuses them and changes them. Can we find it?

At the very end of his Pentecost speech Peter says, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." For all the changes from Biblical times to ours, this notion of the corruption of human society seems to have changed very little. Self-centeredness, greed, arrogance and domination remain remarkably durable. However we explain the Holy Spirit, its purpose is to guide us from this corruption to a different way of being, a way so refreshingly different that "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams." And these visions and dreams "will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below."

Very moving stuff. But then Joel gets a little hard to understand. "...blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood." Just when I think I catch a glimpse of what the Spirit is, or how it works, how it will end our corruption, the descriptions trail off into incomprehensibility, impenetrability. Of all the mysteries in the Trinity, the Holy Spirit seems to be the most impenetrable. And yet I take seriously that the Holy Spirit came that Pentecost Day, that those gathered in Jerusalem witnessed it, and that in seeing it, throngs were made new. I don't care too much about the numbers that joined that day. What I care about is that the Spirit had the power to change lives, and that when people experienced the Spirit, it drew them to itself.

That day in Jerusalem, people experienced rushing wind, there were flames on everyone's shoulders, and the words the apostles spoke were heard each in their own language. Beautiful and evocative images—wind and fire and universal understanding. But I'm still struggling to get my mind around the Holy Spirit. With what words can I describe the experience of it? The Holy Spirit seems to be all around us and within us. We seem just at the edge of grasping it. And then it slips through our fingers.

I once heard a parable that maybe comes close to capturing the Holy Spirit.¹

The sky was clear and brilliant blue; the wind was strong and steady. The boat skimmed over the water so fast and high, the sailors felt like they were in low-flying airplanes rather than boats.

The boat was so fast that the passengers couldn't feel the wind. They were going nearly as fast as the wind, so to them, there was no wind. They only knew the wind was blowing hard and straight because their sails were taut and they were racing across the sea.

It was great fun — watching the sea rush by and seeing the shore grow closer. Of course, their goal was the shore, where they were going to meet family they'd not seen in a long time. And while they were anxious for the shore, they were also enjoying the journey.

It's not as though there was no work for them to do. The sea was large, the journey was long, and the boat had to be maintained, meals had to be prepared, and the sails and tackle required constant tending. But with the steady approach of land and constancy of the wind, the work was light and easy.

One day, they happened upon an old sailor in a small boat. His face was as weather beaten as his boat. His arms were massive, with muscles built from years of fighting the wind. He looked undaunted despite his exhaustion.

¹ <http://oneinjesus.info/2007/12/the-holy-spirit-a-metaphor/> (adapted) accessed June 7, 2014

As the first boat approached, he began to shout. "You're going the wrong direction! You're supposed to tack into the wind!" He continued to work the tiller and pull on ropes, forcing his boat into the wind.

The captain of the first boat came on deck to check out the visitor. He ordered his crew to strike the sails so they could talk. "We're just trying to get to shore. The wind is from the west. This is the way!"

The old man snarled. "It's God's wind, isn't it? Who are you to challenge God's way? The wind is from the west, and so I'm going west!"

The captain was puzzled. "If it's God's wind, then why not let God blow us where he wants us to go?"

"Because," the old man said, with disdain, "God wants us to work for our passage. It's not supposed to be easy. He taught us to tack because he wants us to tack. It's hard, and it's tough — but it makes hard, tough people. It's a test, can't you see? Will we do it the easy way or the hard way? I know that God's way is the hard way."

The captain replied, "There are many boats going this way. You are the only one going upwind. We sail easily and fast."

The old man retorted, "What's right isn't what's popular! I honor God by fighting the wind, by standing firm against those who scoff, by being tough and not being afraid to be different."

"You're soft. Come about and sail with me. I'll teach you how to tack into the wind, day after day, year after year, and prove yourself to God."

The captain shook his head sadly. "God didn't make this hard. You're making it hard. You can use God's wind to sail with him or you can sail against God. You make your own choice."

But even as he spoke, the boats were pulling apart, and so the conversation ended.

I guess the writer of this parable is offering a critique of the old man. The captain of the boat going with the wind believed that if you discern the direction God's wind is blowing and just get in sync with it, life will be easy. The captain was incredulous that the old man was sailing constantly against the wind. The captain was dismayed that the old man thought God wanted him to sail against the wind, to prove himself to God, that the old man thought life was supposed to be difficult.

These are both venerable ideas of the Christian life. In one version, get in sync with God and you're sailing with the wind on an easy voyage. In the other version, the easy way is filled with temptation and corruption. In this version, the way is narrow and steep. The gate to the city is as small as the eye of a needle.

Trouble is, there is a little truth in both of these views. But there is also enough lie in them both that I cannot imagine they capture the Holy Spirit. I cannot believe that either view in this parable would have moved the multitudes in Jerusalem on Pentecost.

Let's give the parable another try. In our new parable the captain has discovered that sailing with the wind is smooth and delicious. But this wind, God's wind, is not just a simple thing. Sometimes the wind blows you straight for the shoals. If the captain were to insist on always sailing with the wind, he would be shipwrecked and lost. In this revised parable sometimes, the captain realizes, sailing can be hard. In those hard times you have to tack into the wind. But like the old sailor says, with the right knowledge you can sail into the wind. It's all about having the knowledge of how to tack and having the patience stay at it rather than expecting that the wind will always be with you.

Maybe we're closer to the Holy Spirit now. Maybe the wind is life itself. In life there are many days that are smooth sailing. There are many blessings in life. In fact, very often we make life too hard on ourselves. We sail into the wind when we don't have to. We make choices that make our journey harder. On the other side of the coin, sometimes we want to believe that sailing

should be always easy. Often we head into the shoals simply because the way is easier than sailing against the wind.

In the end, the wind is not the Holy Spirit. Even the Bible says the wind will blow where it will. Maybe the Holy Spirit is more like guidance and discernment, an ability to understand even when the language of life is as confusing as a foreign tongue. To paraphrase the woman at the well, how do we get this living, discerning spirit?

To extend our metaphor, by sailing toward the right destination. When Peter talked of this corrupt generation, he had in mind replacing our human willfulness with God's will. Peter understood that left to our own devices we will sail toward crazy destinations following after the wiles of the world, often headed for shoals. But, as it says of those who were stirred by the Spirit, "were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. With the Holy Spirit guiding us in this way of living, we may sail toward goodly destinations, often, sailing with a favorable wind. And on those days when the wind is against us, we may be strengthened and assured by confidence in our direction and comforted that with God's help we can tack against the wind. My guess is that if we were to live in and convey the presence of this Spirit as happened that first Pentecost day, the resurgence of the church would leave future historians scratching their heads and sifting the facts, trying to explain what the Holy Spirit has done. Thanks be to God. Amen.