

**“Pentecostal Power”**  
**Acts 2:1-21**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**Day of Pentecost**  
**May 31, 2009**

Ah, the lengths we go to get excited about Pentecost. Some minister friends shared some of our antics recently. Some have held confirmation on Pentecost. Others have given sermons leading up to Pentecost. A few performed dramatic interpretations on Pentecost. One church invited the congregation to dress in red, and put red tissue type paper on the walls in the sanctuary. Yet another had a reception with a “Happy Birthday, Holy Spirit!” cake. I shared with them how our church rented what we thought was a wind machine a couple of years ago, which turned out to be a piece of burlap held against a metal cage that you crank by hand. It sounded a lot like a piece of burlap held against a metal cage. “That’s nothing,” one of my friends said, “we tried to simulate tongues of fire and ended up setting the communion table on fire.” Fortunately someone doused it with water from the baptismal font. “People in my church have shown less interest in Pentecost,” said one friend in Georgia, “than in a watermelon seed spitting contest. And that’s not an exaggeration. I have data to prove it.”<sup>1</sup>

It’s hard to get excited about Pentecost. Easter is over – the brass are gone. Confirmation is past us. The Elijah concert is over and done. Summer’s almost here and it’s easy for this Sunday to feel like the only thing standing between us and 10am worship starting next week. It’s hard to get excited about Pentecost.

Most of us are used to apologizing for the Christian church, not celebrating its birth. We’re used to being apologists for the church and for our participation in it, not commemorating its founding. We’ve got plenty of evidence of its failings. Whole books have been written, surveys taken, articles published outlining how the church is judgmental, antigay, the front office for right wing politics. More than a few people who grew up in a church have stories about how the church or its leaders wronged them, how the community was too pushy or not welcoming enough, how a religious vocabulary was wedded to a mean-spirited agenda against human beings.

It’s no wonder it’s hard to get excited about Pentecost. It’s not hard to find evidence of the church’s failings. It’s not hard to separate a gracious Jesus from his harsh followers. It’s not hard to find reasons to dismiss the whole thing. No wind machine, no amount of drama, no birthday cake or ceremony can change all of that.

It’s hard to get excited about Pentecost. Even on the church’s first Pentecost there wasn’t a whole lot to celebrate. Only one verse records anything about the disciples gathered there. Only one verse about *them*. “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.” That’s it. Together in one place. Not much to speak about. Not much to celebrate. Not much more than a verse recording time and place.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Rev. Matt Fry, a participant in Habeer, for provoking the conversation and informing much of this sermon.

It was hard to get excited about Pentecost. Easter was over. Jesus was ascended to heaven which, for the disciples, meant that he was not with them; he was somewhere else. The church already seemed broken by someone who had sold out a friend, and by disciples who proved to be more afraid of the empire than trusting of their God. It was hard to be excited about Pentecost.

It makes me wonder if most people who find themselves caught up together in this thing called church ever really feel good about it. The people who gathered together on the day of Pentecost must have already been embarrassed by their own hypocrisy or that of their friends, self-conscious by their failings or those of their friends, mortified by their own failures or those of their siblings in the faith. I don't know that many Christians have ever really felt good about this thing called Church. I don't know if there's ever been a time when we've ever been excited to celebrate it.

Even when the disciples are animated, when tongues of fire and mysterious winds, and instant translation rouse the neighborhood, "church" is not really the thing that excites them. They don't come together and shout to the people around them, "look at us. Look what we can do." They don't believe that they should celebrate themselves because they are different, or better, or even unique. They don't run to develop mission and vision statements declaring what's so great about their community. What excites the disciples is the amazing things that *the Spirit* has enabled them to do, the courageous people *the Spirit* has enabled them to become, the saving things *the Spirit* is causing them to say and do and become in the world.

The way Acts tells it, they're not together because they have some things in common. They're not together because they have similar religious, political, social, or cultural outlooks. They're not impressive because of who they are or what they've done. The Spirit of God has brought them together despite their differences, despite their failings, despite everything about them – brought them together to take part in God's saving work in the world. The Spirit of God had given them power – power to heal, power to prophesy, power to resist, power not to fear.

Maybe that kind of talk makes you as nervous as I feel when I hear people attributing their actions to God's work. I get concerned when I hear people saying that God caused them to get a promotion, or God caused them to buy a new car, or God caused them to get a parking space that morning. People who believe God has authorized their work can be dangerous, hurtful, sometimes even murderous people. There can be a heavy cost to slapping God's name onto the rear bumper of your own initiative.

But there is another sort of heavy cost for not attributing to God work that belongs to *the Spirit*. At a dinner party not too long ago, Kate and I were introduced to another couple as Presbyterian ministers and I could see their faces fall. I suddenly felt that all of the baggage of 2000 years of religious oppression was cast across our foreheads like some diabolic tattoo. It was like a caution sign had been thrown up – warning, cavemen ahead. For a while, all four of us seemed to steer the conversation to every place but religion. And then Kate made some comment that started with something like, "as I progressive Christian. . . I think God. . ." and a member of this couple said, "I'm sorry, but I have to ask, what are progressive Christians? I've never heard those two words put together before."

There is a cost to not attributing to God work that belong to the Spirit. The Spirit that descended on that first Pentecost day after Jesus had departed, gave the community the power of speech – the power to speak to God’s action in the world. The power to name God’s imminent presence in and around us – where God is acting right now. And churches like ours have neglected that power for far too long. In our rightful recognition of the hurtful power of speech we have neglected the healing power of speech that God calls the community to bear to the world.

And we’ve been given that power. God has acted in this community. I see it every week. I saw it Friday when friends and loved ones came to testify to the kind soul of K. Lasseter. She was as skeptical of doctrine and rigidity as any critic, but she was here because she believed that God had touched her life, that God was active in and around her, and not a person at her memorial service – atheist, agnostic, Christian, Jew or other expressed any hurt from her claim; most were grateful for it, saying things like, “even I could come to a church like this one!”

I drove over to Ft. Worthington Elementary School on Thursday night to a steamy recreation center where the Church with a capital C is the only thing standing between closures to recreation centers, centers that in spite of their crumbling bricks and mortar, and lack of programming are still saving the lives of some of our children. And if – no when those cuts are reversed – it will be only because the Church with a capital C said that God demands that these children be as valued as any other. I was in this sanctuary on Wednesday night when our tutoring program celebrated 45 years of commitment to the city’s children – the longest running volunteer tutoring program in the nation. Children were dancing right here in this space and I have no problem believing and claiming that God was delighted by the smiles on their faces.

For all of the missteps of the Christian faith, all of the evil wrought by the Church through the centuries against Jews, against Muslims, against people of other faiths or no faith, against gays and lesbians, against dissenters, against women, it makes me all the more resolved to celebrate the Spirit active in and through the Church in times when it does rise up to its calling.

Because the living Spirit of God delivers a message of extravagant grace and radical inclusivity, a justice, and love that is worth celebrating. A message that the Spirit is, even now, working in and through the Church. A preacher friend of mine tells of getting a phone call late one afternoon in his office in the church he serves in Norcross, Georgia. It was a mother calling from her town two hours south of Atlanta who wanted him to call her son. He had just moved to their area. She wanted my friend to talk to him, and to tell him that he was going to hell. Both he and his partner were going to hell. Was he the kind of pastor, was this the kind of church that would do this sort of thing?

And my friend told her that not only had she called the wrong church, she had called the wrong pastor. Her son and his partner would be welcomed into this church, would be at home here, and would find grace here. The mother agreed that “that might be even better,” but followed it with, “but I worry about pastors and churches that are too accepting.”

And my friend commented: we're honored to be accused of being too accepting of human beings, because this isn't our story that we're proclaiming. This is *God's* resurrecting story – *God's* story that's happening right here in our community; God's story of welcoming outsiders, offering blessings to those who have been condemned, offering a new life nurtured by love and grace. It's a story that sounds a lot like 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—all precious enough to God to be included in God's story, shared with them in their own language. This is God's story – of children brought from the margins and into the center, of rich and poor brought together to share in God's love, of justice rolling down like the waters of a mighty stream. This is God's story.

So please don't be alarmed if you hear rumblings next Pentecost that the pastor's trying to light fires on the communion table or searching for a commercial-sized blower for the Pentecostal effect. Don't be alarmed if you hear me talking about what God is doing in my life or the life of our congregation. Don't worry if you hear me claiming that some of our actions, some of our courage, some of our agendas have more to do with the Spirit of God than they do with our own innate abilities.

It won't be because I suddenly have warm feelings about the institutional church. It won't be because I'm suddenly ignorant of our limitations, or ignorant of the mistakes that we human beings often make in community with each other. It won't be because I've made a poor decision to gloss over the sinful parts of our heritage – of unholy things done in God's name. It won't be because I have a higher opinion of organized religion than I ought.

It will only be because I have seen the Spirit in the fullness of her extravagant grace and radical inclusivity, in the fullness of her power to blow through sanctuaries and city halls, it will only be because I have seen the saving power of God and I just have to tell what I've seen, I just have to say what I've heard, I just can't contain myself any longer.