

“Getting Our Attention”
Acts 2:1-21 – May 31, 2009

INTRO: Pentecost initially was a Jewish harvest festival that was celebrated 50 days after Passover—its name based on the Greek word for 50. The Pentecost story tells us about the beginnings of the community we have come to call church, and how the workings of God’s Spirit made this possible. This story marks the beginning of the active missionary work of the church—how it carried forward the ministries that were empowered by the Spirit and how it shared the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes it takes something dramatic to get our attention. One of the “sweet spots” to live in the Milwaukee area, according to the April *Milwaukee* magazine, is Jackson Park Boulevard. I’ve driven down that street for months, but it really caught my eye once the fruit trees started blooming. It was magnificent. I found that any time I was heading west, I would try to take it, and enjoy those trees, which I’m told were intentionally planted, once the elm trees were no more.

Just down the block from me, on Forest Street, a plaster of Paris steer appeared in a neighbor’s yard a couple weeks ago. I would walk by it with my dog, and we both couldn’t help but wonder what it was for. One day this last week, the family who lives in that house was in the yard, and I went over and asked them about the steer. The woman’s brother-in-law is a cattle broker. They were having a family party, and the brother-in-law asked if he could bring something for the party. My neighbor said, “No, we’ll provide the food,” and her brother-in-law said, “Well, I’ll just bring something from work.” She had expected he would show up with some steaks or burgers, and instead he showed up with a 400 pound plaster steer that you can’t help but see as you go by their house. It’s out-of-place, wearing a yellow ribbon because a family member has just gone to Afghanistan to serve in the military, and I’m sure will be a conversation piece for months to come, for it’s so heavy it won’t be easily moved.

I’ve wondered if God was trying to get people’s attention with the special effects of wind and fire, which are the ways the Spirit is described as having arrived on Pentecost Day. Barbara Brown Taylor describes that day like this: “There they were, about a hundred and twenty of them, all moping around wondering what they were going to do without Jesus, when they heard a holy hurricane headed their way. Before any of them could defend themselves, that mighty wind had blown through the entire house, striking sparks that burst into flames above their heads, and they were filled up with it—every one of them was filled to the gills with God’s own breath. Then something clamped down on them and the air came out of them in languages they did not even know they knew. Like a room full of bagpipes all going at once, they set up such a racket that they drew a crowd. Before the day was over, the church had grown from one hundred twenty to more than three thousand. Shy people had become bold, scared people had become gutsy, and lost people had found a sure sense of direction.” *(Home By Another Way)*

The coming of the Spirit would have been hard to ignore as it was both heard—a sound like the winds of a storm and seen—tongues as of fire. John Macintyre speaks of Pentecost as “wholehearted expression of the almost unlimited imagination of God.” That’s what God let loose in the church and in our lives. On this day we celebrate the vital, creative life-giving energy of God—the Spirit—which still gives life to the church.

Harvard scholar Diana Eck has written about the early church in her book, *Encountering God*. She discovered that Pentecost was one of the most unique and creatively celebrated days on the church’s calendar. In 10th century Rome, for example, they made it a dramatic, dynamic event. The custom of painting heavenly scenes on the great domed and vaulted ceilings of cathedrals served not only to inspire people, but it also disguised some discreet trap doors. These small openings were drilled through the cathedral ceiling to the rooftop and they came to be known as “Holy Spirit holes.” During the Pentecost worship service, some unlucky servants would be drafted to climb up on the roof. At the appropriate moment during the liturgy, they would release live doves through these holes. From out of the painted skies and clouds on the cathedral ceiling, swooping, diving symbols of a vitally present Holy Spirit would descend toward the people below. At the same moment the choirboys would break into the whooshing and drumming sound of a holy windstorm. Finally, as the doves were flying and the winds were

rushing, down through the ceiling holes would come bushels and bushels of red rose petals, showered on the congregation, as symbols of the tongues of fire. *(Homiletics, 5/26/96)*

Those were 10th century special effects, but I would say, not too shabby ones either. A Pentecost Sunday with special effects that I remember, took place the last Sunday I preached at 5th Avenue Church in West Bend, right before I moved to Greenfield. It was a rainy day, and during the late service, the storm became more fierce. In the middle of my sermon there was this racket on the roof—a kind of rumbling. I just figured it was thunder and kept on preaching. After church, one of the ushers came and told me I really needed to come outside with him, where he showed me the cement cross, the one that used to be on the west peak of the roof, and now stood at our feet. It had blown off and bumped its way down the tile roof during my sermon. I asked people to please not tell the Greenfield Church, because I didn't want them to think I would come there and immediately destroy their building! The images of Pentecost are ones which get our attention.

I heard about a church, which gave each person a red carnation to mark the day. During worship, the people listened attentively to the reading of the Pentecost story from the book of Acts, about how the disciples had heard “what sounded like a powerful wind from heaven,” about how the Holy Spirit appeared: “like tongues of fire.” Then came the sermon. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon us,” the preacher began. “Like a powerful wind from heaven!” shouted a woman sitting in the front pew. Then she threw one of the red carnations toward the altar. The preacher began again. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon us.” The same woman's voice rang out: “Like the tongues of fire, like the tongues of fire!” And she threw another carnation toward the altar. The preacher looked straight at her and said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon you, now throw your pocketbook.” To which the woman replied with conviction: “Preacher, you just done calmed the wind and put out the fire.” *(Wesley Taylor)*

This is a day of special effects that are meant to give us life. Maybe it's God's way of jump-starting us, connecting us with God's creative energy, is finding ways to work in our world, so that we stop and pay attention. About a month and a half ago, there was a *Newsweek* article entitled “The End of Christian America.” It pointed out that “the percentage of self-identified Christians has fallen 10 points, from 86 to 76%, in the past two decades. And the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation has nearly doubled in the same time period, rising from 8 to 15%.”

I read the article, I found some of it helpful, other parts not so much. And I had discussion with a few people who asked me about the article. My take on the subject is that I do believe the church is going to have to reinvent itself, if we are going to flourish and grow, and be vibrant on into this century. I don't know exactly what that's going to look like, and unfortunately I'm one of the Baby Boomers, who are part of the problem, because our ideas about church are fifty years old! But I'm counting on God's Spirit to help lead us where we need to go and the article certainly got my attention, and sparked my interest.

Looking around on our UMC website—the one for the General Church, I noticed that some of the churches listed in each Annual Conference, were designated as “Welcoming Congregations”—their names were marked in Pentecost red. I wasn't quite sure what that meant, but looked around a bit more, and found that these churches are ones that have met some of 40 standards for being a place that welcomes newcomers. The list included things like having: greeters, quarterly usher/greeter training, congregational name tags, follow up of visitors by laity as well as clergy, facility tours for guests, adding a social networking link to the church website-like Facebook. Let me tell you, this all caught my attention. Some of these things our leaders have been talking about putting into place, and they're on our list of goals for the next couple years, yet there were lots more on that list we haven't even thought about.

This is a day that we celebrate the ways God tries to get our attention. That story of Pentecost, about the very beginnings of what we've come to call church, may bring us to the startling realization, that the contemporary church has to find ways to reinvent itself, what the UMC has titled “Rethink Church.”

For far too long, we've been comfortable within our own walls, with the ministry that the people already here, are involved in. Too many times, what goes on here, stays here—kind of like that TV advertisement for Las Vegas. We have not been good at being intentional about a ministry to newcomers, or letting people know what we're up to.

“The Spirit is the power which enables the church to ‘go public’ with its good news, to attract a crowd and to have something to say worth hearing.” (William Willimon)

Ernie Campbell describes what it's like to visit the Metrodome stadium in Minneapolis. “When one leaves the Metrodome, there is a mighty push of wind that propels one to the outside world in a hurry. A physicist would be needed to explain this phenomenon. Something about the controlled pressure of the dome clashing with the prevailing pressure outside. But the outrush is strong and unmistakable. It has power—it propels. Exiting this sports arena is an event in itself.”

What if the Holy Spirit were to push us out into the world with similar force, after our “in house” worship? Perhaps we'd be more excited, more animated, more willing to go public with the good news of the love of God.

--Sue Burwell

