

Sermon
St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday May 20, 2018 Pentecost Year B
Text. Acts 2: 1-21
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Theme: Drunk with Possibilities

Today we celebrate the birth of the church in the Feast of Pentecost. And as it is every year, one of our defining stories is read from the Acts of the Apostles. It is a wild and funny story. The friends and followers of Jesus are hanging out in Jerusalem doing what Jesus told them to do, waiting for the gift of the Spirit. Waiting of course is difficult for any of us but especially if you are uncertain about what you are waiting for.

Without warning the friends of Jesus experience a wild descent of the Spirit of God upon them from on high. It is a strange disruption, but as a result the disciples speak in other tongues and hear and understand things they did not before, as does the diverse crowd that gathers to witness the commotion. It is as if a new opening in the world has taken place, and mischief is afoot.

The crowd that gathers on the street struggles to understand what is happening. Some in the crowd chalk it all up to over-imbibing. "They're drunk, just like that Jesus fellow, the party animal and winebibber they used to follow."

It is an interesting accusation, really. I wonder what it might mean to be a church accused of being inebriated, happy, carried away by God's Spirit. Just a wild thought that seems fitting for Pentecost.

Peter, of course, stands up and addresses the crowd, letting them know that the apostles are not drunk as it is only 10 am in the morning. Evidently there were not brunches with mimosas available in Jerusalem at that time.

But the point of the whole story is that in a certain way, Peter is wrong. The disciples *are* drunk in a way, for Pentecost itself is a reminder that the church is fueled by the inebriation of the Spirit. At the heart of the church's life is a kind of strange "drunkness" that makes the timid bold, that ignites the imagination of the prophets, stirs the compassion of people, energizes the quest for justice, inspires peacemaking, creates courage to reconcile, and so much more. The crazy life of the church is created by the wild disruption of the spirit in our lives and in our faith communities. When the Spirit gets hold of a people, whether they be old or young, artists or pragmatics, they begin to dream the dreams of God, to have visions of the what the kingdom might be like in their own community. They begin to listen to what God desires and take risks to make it happen. They realize that God has resources and energy and purposes that are so interesting and vital and life-giving.

The church animated by the fresh winds of the Spirit is not a place that allows discouragement or despair to take root but finds about it the fresh scent of growth in the dreams of God.

To be perfectly honest, all this talk of the Spirit, while encouraging and exciting, is also rather terrifying at times. For when the Spirit of God invades the people of God it often means change and new ways of seeing and hearing and speaking as the apostles experienced. The Spirit while vital and life-giving is also disruptive of the status quo and our expected ways of operating. The Spirit is always stirring the people of God to look for new ways to communicate the good news of God to a world that doesn't always want to listen.

To be sure, the Spirit most certainly is a great comfort, a holy solace to us; and yet the Spirit inevitably catapults us out of the building and into mission. The New Testament's Greek word for Church is *ekklesia*, which means "called out." We are called out of the dance, out of the hall, to grab the hand of somebody who is hurting, lonely, poor, or curious. The Church is not a club, a nice place where nice people do nice things with other nice people. We "speak in tongues," meaning we find the language to tell our story, the story of Christ's saving love, to people who don't speak our language. We figure out a way to translate the love and compassion of God into the culture and neighborhood around us in ways that are attractive and lively and provocative.

I'm not exactly sure of how this might look for St. Mark's and I don't think we can know all that the Spirit has in mind for us or what shape the ongoing newness of God might take. But I do know that the Spirit has been active and at work here from the very beginning of our time together.

Five years ago, on the Feast of Pentecost I said this in a sermon.

This next fall we plan to open a Montessori School for ages 2-6 in our building and I don't think any of it would be possible without the animating work of the Spirit in our midst and God pushing us out of our comfort zones and shaking up our world and helping us to reach out into our community in a language that they understand of caring for the lives of children and families.

The creation of the school was not an easy process. It took a great deal of hard work and dedication and an amazing effort by the teachers and assistants and the school board to make it all happen and to help it evolve into something beautiful and sustainable today. This last year we had a record 48 students enrolled in our school and we expanded our hours to include Friday and before- and aftercare. This coming year there will be more changes as the work of the Spirit continues in the school.

I wonder where, if we look over the past several years, can we see the spirit at work at St. Mark's?

Maybe people have forgotten, but there are 138 solar panels on our roof, collecting the energy of the sun and reducing our carbon footprint every day. St. Mark's Solar team led the way in getting this done, but you the people of St. Mark's invested in it and made it possible in a way that surprised even those closest to the project. Over the past several years we have taken some very tangible steps to be a more green congregation and to reduce our energy costs -even though we cannot seem to figure out that the blue bins around the church are for recycling, not trash, and we hope to improve on that in the coming year.

I want to point to another place where I think that spirit is at work. A few years ago we heard from our members that they wanted small group experiences where they could learn and discuss matters important to their faith. So we took a risk and began to have small group classes and experiences after coffee, hour during what we now call our education hour. We weren't sure how it would go. We were afraid we'd offer classes and groups and that no one would come. In fact, the first time around I encouraged people to recruit people to attend their classes so that they would have a critical mass to begin. It all turned out to be a hilarious suggestion as more than 70 people turned up for classes the very first session. Since then we've had classes on The Lord's Prayer, biblical Greek, Race in American, the writings of Wendell Berry on Creation, Passionate Women of the Bible, Julian of Norwich, Parables of the Bible, Sabbath-Keeping, The Bible and Social Justice, Understanding Islam 101, The Act of Marriage, Healing Prayer, Contemplative Prayer, Simplicity of Life, Faith and Trauma, End of Life Planning, Praying with Icons, Faith and Finance, Historic Roots of the Eucharist and so much more.

We've discovered that the Spirit is at work in nurturing our faith lives through small group experiences. We've learned that we are a community of inquiry and curiosity about how our faith connects to our daily lives and the life of our world. It has been an amazing journey and one that we are excited to continue. There may be a class that God is urging you to offer. There may be something that you want to learn about. There may be some risk that the Spirit is urging you to take that will help our congregation to grow into the full stature of Christ.

Lately I've been wondering where the Spirit might lead us in the coming year. I've wondered because I've felt a restlessness at St. Mark's - a willingness to step into something new. Something that will stretch us as a congregation to reach out with God's loving care in a new way. I wonder what it will be? Will it be partnering with the Faith Coalition for Immigrant Justice? Will it be joining forces with Albuquerque Heading Home to help get people off of the streets and into safe housing? Will it be creating a Family Life Resource Center with counseling and parenting classes? I don't know what the Spirit has in store for us, but all it takes is one faithful person to sense the Spirit's movement and begin to take a risk in sharing God's love with this hurting and needy world.

The story of our beginnings as the church is really a great story. It's a perfect story for a world that too often seems paralyzed by fear, isolated from each other, overwhelmed by complexity, and hunkered down in their own private concerns. In our story, the Spirit transforms these very people into a people of power and action and vision. To be sure, they don't always know what they are doing, but they know in whose service they are trying to do it.

And that is how the church begins.

And it is sustained by the **teaching of the Apostles**, which is a fancy way of saying becoming lifelong learners in the faith, because none of us know it all and we must be taught the faith through **fellowship**, because we all need support and care. We find that in the family that the Holy Spirit makes out of strangers, in the **breaking of bread**, because in Christ the bodily and the spiritual are joined, and hospitality is a mark of the kingdom of God, and in **prayers**, because in the Spirit we become part of something greater than ourselves, and we are graciously put in touch with some huge power beyond our own powers.

So our story moves from a discouraging defeat, the bloody end of Jesus' mission, to anxious waiting, wild disruption of the Spirit, and into a place of new beginnings, to a vision of a whole New World, a new family of the hopeful called the church. This new family will spread like a wildfire across continent and languages and ethnicities by the Holy Spirit's power. It's far more than a new institution being formed; it is rather a new people transformed by the Holy Spirit and alive in a new way. Today we welcome Cayetano into that new family of the church. We claim this young man as part of the vast family of God, and we trust that the same spirit at work on the day of Pentecost is also at work within this young person, urging him into a life-giving relationship with God. And we as a people will promise to cooperate with the Spirit's work, to help Cayetano grow up to know and love God, to care for people around him, and to know the wonder of God's creation and to work to protect and sustain it. This, too, is a mighty work of the Spirit: caring for and nurturing the spiritual lives of children and youth, helping to shape the next generation of faithful, soulful, pastoral, thoughtful Christians who will make a difference in their families, workplaces and schools. For Spirit works in each of us binding us to God's loving purposes and shaping us into God's people here and now.

It has been said that it is a sin for the church to hunker down as if nothing new has ever happened, becoming a community turned in on itself. The church was not created to be a stable, fixed resting place for a few self-congratulating people. If the story of Pentecost teaches us anything, we are to be a wildfire, a catalyst, a transformative community that offers a foretaste of a whole new age. The church is meant to be part of the forward movement of the Spirit, looking for new ways to share the message of God's love to the world and offer a life-giving vision to those around us.

This is how the church began, and it's the only way we can continue as a church – to race to keep up with the movement of the Holy Spirit wherever it takes us. What kind of church might we be if we are constantly open and receptive to the wild promptings of the Spirit? To be sure, it will be an adventure for any church that decides to embrace the fire of the Spirit. Who knows? If we do, we might just be accused of being drunk on a Sunday Morning, inebriated by God, drunk with possibilities.

Note: I wish to acknowledge my debt to the exegesis of William Willamon in preparing this sermon in his Pulpit Resources. I love his idea of “a strange sort of drunkenness” as a metaphor for the church being animated by the power of the Holy Spirit. May it be so among us.