

WORSHIP

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The Church of Odd

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1 Corinthians 12:4-13

Acts 2:1-21

Paraclete. That is the Greek word Jesus uses for the Holy Spirit. The KJV translates it as “comforter” and counselor in NIV. “to exhort and encourage, to comfort and console, to call upon for help and to appeal” are also all worthy transitions of *paraclete*. Can one word mean all these things? And the bigger question is: Can God really do all these things?

“Advocate” has always been my favorite translation, my preferred title for the Holy Spirit. Perhaps it comes from years working with children and youth in the church. Perhaps because it supports God’s call for us to align ourselves with the poor, the marginalized, those prevented from voting, the enslaved, the oppressed, the worn down, the persecuted and the imprisoned.

Advocate. If you think about it that title also aligns well with the skill sets of a good attorney: to fight, be vigilant, but also be a good counselor and listener, a comforter in difficult times, someone to fight for justice, save you from the injury of others, but also sometimes save you from yourself. [thank you John Peterson and LJ]. Yes, what I’m saying is I like to think of the Holy Spirit as my attorney.

But let’s not venture too far from the story because it is the story that brings us here today. It is the story that binds us together with other members of the family of faith because we are part of the story of Pentecost.

Well, really, it is the story of that *particular* Pentecost. The one we just read was not the first one. Pentecost for the Jewish community was a holy day. In the Old Testament it is known as the Feast of Weeks. It began at Passover and lasted for 50 days (thus the name “Pentecost,” literally “the fiftieth”). But what happened on that Pentecost day in Jerusalem?

Well, the disciples, friends and followers of Jesus got together for the holidays. For Pentecost. They had been dispersed, each in their own way trying to process all that had happened.



Asking themselves: Was this Jesus' plan all along? Is that possible? That after all those lessons, miracles and late night chats he wanted to die and come back just to leave? And what did Jesus mean by the advocate he was sending? What exactly was that? Was it/she/he already here? What in the world were they supposed to do next?

Well, many of those questions were set aside for the time as they met up in Jerusalem for the holy day of Pentecost. So the Marys were there and Martha, Lazarus, all the disciples, except ...of course...poor Judas.

As friends they were eager to be together. As followers of the Way all paths led to Jerusalem that day. They gathered as that particular group of people because of Jesus but they gathered on that day because of their religious heritage.

See, too often the church thinks it's the central faith of the world forgetting that we follow and are graphed into a long history of God's chosen people. The holy day that they were all gathered for was not a Christian celebration of course, it wasn't celebrating the birth of the church as we sometimes call it today. It was associated with the giving of the Covenant to Moses on Mt Sinai so it had long been celebrated with images of sound and fire.

So I imagine they all gathered in the house of the friend with the biggest kitchen which was decorated with banners covered with felt flames, maybe some fake burning bushes and you know some prankster would have replaced the light bulb in the bathroom with a red bulb. And surely there was a lot of raucous laughing, story telling and loud music. They certainly had some steam to let off, and stories to share of what they had been up to since....that day. That day they looked up in the sky and watched their friend, teacher, and Lord depart into the clouds. And what was it that Jesus said right before he left? That they would be given power from the Holy Spirit, Spirit Power, paracletos, and they would see it and tell others about it in Jerusalem!

Yes, that day. But still it didn't make sense. Jesus was the source of power and now he was gone, as he predicted, sure but....(sigh)

Martha was running around as usual. Thrilled but also worried about all the guests she needed to cook for. Bringing in drinks from the cooler on the back deck, into the living room, the front porch, the kitchen (why does everyone hang out there when its clear there's cooking going on?) even the guest room. Every space filled. And Peter, usually the life of the party, was more reflective and serious than usual. He spoke quietly in the corner with other disciples. He seemed agitated but at the same time at calm.

And just as they were about to sit down for the meal there was a sound. A very loud sound. Not a peaceful sound something almost...violent. A wind? But how could a wind sound like that? Quickly they all gathered in the central room and that's when the wind came in. And from that wind came well, its hard to describe.



Tongues? But not human tongues, not anything that can be contained in the human mouth but more like flames they way the lick the air from within a camp fire and then these “flames” peeled off from one another and each person there found a warmth resting on the top of their heads.

Martha nearly keeled over. She went to grab a bucket of water but then she heard her neighbor cry “don’t be afraid, it is the advocate come upon us”. Stranger still Martha remembered her neighbor was from Egypt and was speaking in her first language. Friends were calling out to friends, “are you okay? Do you feel it too? What is happening?”

And everyone understood. In their own words, they were heard and understood. No one needed to translate one’s experience for another. Because of the power generated above their heads each person’s experience was validated and affirmed. Authenticated and legitimized.

The power flickering the top of their heads was also reaching out to every person in that room. Indiscriminately. Comprehensively, including all in the miracle. The power resting on John’s head reached out to the power on Mary’s head and they seemed to move in sync as if ...they were dancing. The power, moving and dancing like flames, stayed with each individual but at the same time was choreographing a well coordinated dance among everyone in the room.

The sound of the wind and the astonishment and the dancing and the speaking, the **glossia**, grew louder and louder until Martha was afraid someone was going to call the police. She noticed James’ nervous glances at her. They knew things did not go well for their people when the authorities were called.

Suddenly Peter was no longer silent. He left the house and moved into the street where people had gathered out of curiosity about the odd event taking place. They knew who had gathered in the house that day. The Jesus people. They wondered if all their leader’s talk of revolution and love and inclusiveness would amount to anything once he had disappeared. And here Peter spoke to them, to them (not the people with in the house), of dreams, power and forgiveness. This was not a sermon for the flame throwers, not a sermon for the disciples. This was for the people who had never known Jesus, or cared about Jesus, those who found their ways strange and off putting. This was for them. Never had Martha seen Peter so bold and eloquent. Never had she felt so sure.

The revolution had come.

This is the story of the arrival of the Holy Spirit to the church. A fulfillment of Jesus’ promise that we would receive the power to reach out to those who did not yet know....and tell them that the party is for them too.



The church's story of Pentecost is odd and wonderful. Full of bizarre and highly unlikely events that all unfold and manifest into a message of power bringing in God's kingdom.

I fear the church has forgotten how marvelously odd our calling is. I mean, look at what we're doing here. Gathered in wooden seats or in front of a TV screen to sing out of books, collectively recite ancient words, witness public declarations of faith, commission people to go outside their comfort zones and to do all this, not for ourselves, but for God and for those who could give not one whip about anything of this. William Temple, the archbishop of Canterbury during WW2, said "the church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members."

How very odd, how very non-capitalistic. The church exists not to be great but to serve others for the sake of the gospel. I would wager that not one of us has attended a dinner party that resulted in someone's head catching on fire. Well, maybe it has and if so please come tell me that story later. We do not show up at church too often expecting a violent wind to appear and bring visions of a coming revolution. But perhaps we should. As Annie Dillard wrote:

...do people in church ...have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews."

—Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*

When was the last time church turned your knuckles white? Whether it was out of exhilaration or trepidation? "you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd." wrote Flannery O'Connor. Let us not forget to be odd for the sake of the gospel....in this world that needs more creativity, more jubilation, more raucous laughter and definitely more dancing, and more understanding. Do not forget the odd things our faith calls us to do: tear down walls, pray for our enemies, release the captives, give sight to those who cannot see, touch the untouchable, forgive those who hurt us, walk to places where nothing is certain, feed a crowd with too little food, ask for what we need, move mountains, visit the contagious, make friends with those who persecute us, bring strangers into our safe places, speak truth to power and share whatever good thing we have. Odd, indeed.

What we are called to do and say is still odd and so so needed. The communities of faith in Charlotte can and should be the leaders when it comes to compassion, innovation, hospitality and justice. And in my opinion no one is better able to do all these things than the community of FPC Charlotte, and I'm including all the TV viewers as well. Our reach is far due to our TV ministry and truly we think of /them/you when we worship. We hear your messages, read your emails and appreciate them. One time I received a phone call from a



man who had heard the worship service while at work one Sunday. He is a postal worker, did you know they work on Sundays? He entered the break room and per usual our worship service was playing on the television. But what he wanted me to know was that when he walked into the room a pastor was praying on the television and so were all the postal workers.

Since that Pentecost the Holy Spirit has been on the loose and will show up in the most unexpected places. And so should the church.

Michael Curry is the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church. And prior to that he was the bishop of the North Carolina diocese. As of yesterday he has become a household name since preaching at the wedding of Prince Harry and Megan Markle. But he has been preaching for a long time. Here are some of his thoughts on Jesus:

Jesus was crazy. He said, "Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, pray for those who despitefully use you." He was crazy. He prayed while folk were killing him, "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do." Now, that's crazy.

We need some Christians who are as crazy as the Lord. Crazy enough to love like Jesus, to give like Jesus, to forgive like Jesus, to do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God -- like Jesus. Crazy enough to dare to change the world from the nightmare it often is into something close to the dream that God dreams for it. And for those who would follow him, those who would be his disciples, those who would live as and be the people of the Way? It might come as a shock, but they are called to craziness.

We need some crazy Christians. Sane, sanitized Christianity is killing us. That may have worked once upon a time, but it won't carry the gospel anymore. We need some crazy Christians like Mary Magdalene and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Christians crazy enough to believe that God is real and that Jesus lives. Crazy enough to follow the radical way of the gospel. Crazy enough to believe that the love of God is greater than all the powers of evil and death.

(quoted from Faith & Leadership)

Do not be surprised when the Holy Spirit shows up and asks you to dance. Put on your Holy Spirit shoes and get to the dance floor. Show the world what it means to be the people of God.

