

What does this mean?

Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost, Year C, 2016

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Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Mother, and from our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

There's a wind and a fire blowing through this place. Gathered here is nothing less than a Holy Spirit meeting! Can you feel it?

When the Spirit moved those first followers of Jesus, *they* certainly felt it! We are told that the Spirit was like tongues of fire, like a *violent* wind! I wonder: what did it feel like to be burned by the Spirit? Were the disciples actually blown over, knocked to the ground?

However it happened, it certainly left an impression! The Spirit confused, bewildered, and emboldened the entire room! Passers-by on the street had to ask, "What does this mean?"

Only ten days *before* the day of Pentecost, these disciples watched in stunned silence as their resurrected Lord ascended into the heavens. Jesus commanded them to stay and to preach the good news of Christ to the ends of the earth. But Jesus did not provide them with any instructions or policies or manual. All he promised them was the Spirit: "You will receive power *when* the Holy Spirit has come upon you," he said. And then he's gone. And those disciples were left standing there, looking up at the heavens, wondering, "What in the world do we do next?"

Can you imagine how that must have felt?

Remember - the Ascension, we are told, took place *forty* days after the resurrection, and Pentecost happened *fifty* days after the resurrection. So in fact this stunned, awkward confusion went on for *ten excruciating* days between Jesus' body ascending and the Holy Spirit's dramatic entrance at Pentecost. Of course, God *never* really left them, but how were they to know when and how the Spirit might arrive?

"How are we supposed to be the church in the meantime?" they anxiously wondered throughout those ten days.

And then, you have to give them credit, because they actually **DO** attempt *something*. And what do they do in order to truly become the church? They hold a committee meeting, of course! Check out the

second half of the first chapter of Acts sometime. Those of you who have served on church committees in the past may find a special appreciation for these verses because they read just like meeting minutes.

“Let’s vote on someone who can replace Judas on the church council,” they decide. Judas’s seat needed to be replaced for obvious reasons, and so here was a solvable problem that they could figure out together. First, it is reported, roll call is taken. Second, the meeting opens with prayer. Third, they find a verse from the Old Testament – the closest thing to a church constitution they had in those first days – and they locate the precise bylaw that requires they replace their missing twelfth man.

Finally, they identify two suitable candidates, take a vote, and some guy named Matthias is chosen to fill out the church council. We never hear of Matthias again throughout the New Testament, but we can only assume he faithfully fulfilled his council duties until his term expired.

I can see the back-patting and the coffee that was shared after this inaugural church committee meeting came to a close. Impressed by how efficiently their meeting had been run, these twelve smug men may have even gone to bed that night thinking to themselves, “Hey...we’ve got this church thing down!”

And then...the next morning...out of nowhere...WIND! FIRE! TONGUES! Notice the difference in style and tone from the previous day. In their committee meeting, an orderly system of voting was followed, and a man from within their own ranks was chosen to serve. But in the Holy Spirit meeting, the whole group is broken wide open! People begin speaking languages they had never spoken before! They are tossed around by the Spirit’s mighty breath, and equipped with gifts that will take them places they never before imagined going!

In fact, when the Spirit is in control, visitors walking past the church begin to take notice of what’s happening inside. They had not been drawn in by the necessary and orderly proceedings of the previous night, but when they heard people preaching God’s mighty deeds to them in *their* native tongues, these visitors found this place to be irresistible – something was happening there that they just had to see!

Now it's possible I am making too much of this distinction between the committee meeting and the Holy Spirit meeting. I certainly do not mean to disparage the faithful and prayerful work of committees and teams and groups that have filled church basements and classrooms for centuries! Indeed, some of the most Spirit-led conversations I have ever been a part of have taken place around rectangular folding tables with a Styrofoam cup of coffee in hand.

But the deeper truth that we must acknowledge together is that we can too easily become a self-satisfied people who crave control and order, can't we? When the Spirit blows and burns around us in surprising ways, we can sometimes fail to join in with open arms.

I know these things to be true about me, anyways. Here is just one of many examples. In 2009, I helped the ELCA plan some service projects for youth from around the country to participate in at the big national youth gathering in New Orleans. The focus of the programs I planned was literacy. The idea was that we would bring these wonderful, energetic Lutheran high-schoolers to summer school programs happening around the city where they could help the struggling children of New Orleans learn how to read. With a dedicated team, I planned an elaborate, detailed program that would maximize service contact between the two groups, and we braced ourselves for what we hoped would be a powerful service opportunity for all.

When the youth groups arrived at the site I was managing, however, a very different picture unfolded. When the Lutheran kids met the New Orleans kids, there was no containing the excitement and joy they found in one another! None of them had any interest at all in reading Dr. Seuss together! Instead, they played, laughed, and began telling stories about the very different places they came from.

We heard stories from several young people whose lives had been profoundly impacted by Hurricane Katrina. And many of the Lutheran youth had the wisdom to receive these stories with words of deep compassion: "Hey man, I'm so sorry that happened to you; that's really hard." And even though God's spirit was blowing and burning all over the place as these young people bonded, I couldn't help but feel a little, well...*disappointed* that *my* program, *my* hard work was not being implemented as it was supposed to be! Even more upset than I were some of the adult chaperones who were disappointed they would not be able to snap a picture of their Lutheran kids reading *Horton Hears a Who* with sedate New Orleans kids.

But the Spirit of God had other plans, my friends! And all I had to do was open my eyes, extend my hands, and receive it in welcome. I had planned for a committee meeting, but what I had received was nothing but a Holy Spirit meeting. Acts of love and reconciliation and compassion were happening all around me. And I will never forget it.

The good news, my friends, is that even though we may resist it, and even though we may not recognize it, the Spirit is blowing and burning all around us all the time, and there is nothing we can do that will extinguish it! We can't put it out. We can't control it. We can't put it to a vote! But God's spirit is always and everywhere calling us to join along in its dance, to speak of God's mighty deeds to all people, and to listen to the tongues of fire that God is sending to us.

We hear these tongues of fire everywhere.

They are the tongues that share their stories of joy and of struggle. They are defiant tongues that refuse to accept a way of living that deals death and destruction to the powerless, tongues that demand justice and a change in the status quo.

Tongues of fire. They are tongues of children that laugh and that cry out right in the middle of worship! They are the grief-tongues of weeping for those we love who have died. They are the tongues of committee members staying late into the evening, asking hard questions and casting bold visions. These are the tongues of fire.

It is the tongue of a member of this congregation, sick and in pain, who interrupted me as I spoke the words of Holy Communion to her, repeating right after me in a strained voice, "In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread..." because this is a story that matters to her and that gives her new life, a story that the Spirit calls her to repeat over and over again.

This is indeed a Holy Spirit meeting, my friends. And just like the body of Christ we are about to share, may we allow ourselves to be broken open by the very same Spirit, to welcome voices of interruption and challenge and grace into our midst. May we listen. And may we always, always speak with tongues of fire of the good things that God is doing in our midst.

Amen