

## **“Making Sense of All the Excitement”**

**Acts 2:1-21**

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Most of us have had the experience of approaching some exciting event from a distance and wondering exactly what is going on. In Raleigh, this happens quite often, especially on weekends. Mobs of people roam the streets, traffic backs up, and if it is an event like Brewgaloo, there are also people staggering across the streets. We know from all the sights and sounds that something exciting is happening, but we may not know what it all means and what the implications are for us, whether we want to join in the party or run away as fast as we can!

Something like this is going on in the familiar story we have read from Acts 2, the traditional Pentecost narrative. There is a great deal of excitement, there are mobs of people, sights and sounds, but what does it all mean and what are the implications for us? Do we want to join the party or run for cover? And how do we know, how do we make sense of all the excitement? As with any exiting event, we have to take a closer look, investigate the scene more carefully and see what is going on.

As the story begins, people gather in Jerusalem for the traditional feast of Shavuot which is also called the Feast of Weeks or Pentecost in Greek. It began as a feast to celebrate the first fruits of the harvest, but it has become an occasion to give thanks for the gift of the Torah on Mount Sinai, the means by which the children of Israel have come to live in covenant relationship with God. Thus, this is a significant feast.

People gather from many nations and Jesus’ disciples are there as well. They have been given a commission to serve as his witnesses, they have seen him ascend into heaven and they have chosen a successor for Judas. Now, they are ready to begin! The problem is they don’t have a clue about what they’re going to do, how they’ll go about their witness.

But God does. There is a sound like the rush of a violent wind from heaven. Anyone who has experienced a hurricane or tornado

knows how unsettling this experience must be. Then, divided tongues, as of fire, appear among them, and a tongue rests on each of them. Anyone who has been near a fire knows how jolting this experience probably is. Finally, the Spirit is poured out on them all and thus, there is a great deal of excitement! But what does it all mean?

It means the disciples can do something they could not do before. They can speak in the languages of the people who have gathered and thus they can hear what is said about Jesus and ultimately be able to believe in him. There are a lot of whistles and bells here, there is a great deal of excitement, there are sights and sounds that point to something significant happening, but what is happening is quite simple. People are able to hear the Gospel in their own language, understand and believe.

The implication for us is not that we need to replicate the whistles and bells, though a little excitement is appropriate, but that we allow the Spirit to fall upon us and change us so that we can do things we could not do before, so that we can give witness to the Gospel. The Spirit comes when and how the Spirit comes. We don't control this experience, plan it all out or manipulate matters to our benefit. But we can cooperate with the Spirit and receive the gifts of God that come.

In our individual lives, many of us have known the empowerment of the Spirit. We have walked through life challenges we could not have negotiated alone. We have accomplished things we never imagined possible. We have held on to faith through illness and grief, failure and disappointment, trauma and tragedy, not because we were so strong, but because we had the sense that God was with us every step of the way. The wind may not have blown and the fire may not have come, but the Spirit came down nonetheless and gave us strength to endure.

Churches also know the empowerment of the Spirit. I have mentioned before the Crabtree Valley Baptist Church which has allowed its youth building to be transformed into a Welcome House for Refugees that CBF field personnel Marc and Kim Wyatt now use to extend compassion and hospitality to people coming here from all over the world. We have helped fund some of the renovation of this house.

How did this church with very few members agree to do such a big thing? At the dedication service, the pastor said that in part, they began

in a very un-Baptist way – they did not form a committee! But he also said the Spirit of God had been at work and he didn't just leave it at that. He provided many details of people who got involved, barriers that were overcome, doors that opened. The Spirit came down and empowered a church to accomplish more than it ever imagined it could.

In fact, it is not just individuals and churches which know the empowerment of the Spirit; entire nations have been changed. In the latest issue of *Baptist World*, Baptist World Alliance president Paul Msiza writes about the role prayer played in the dismantling of Apartheid in South Africa. He notes Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane and links the prayers of key figures in the freedom movement to this prayer. He says we should continue protest marches and proclaim freedom and justice. But we must also know "that our power comes from the garden of wailing where we travail and invoke the name of our God until heaven opens and evil powers begin to fall."

He is talking about prayer, but he is also talking about the fact that we cannot accomplish anything significant on our own. We need God's help. We need the Spirit to fall upon us and empower us. Even nations can change when this happens. This is what all the excitement is about.

Yet, before we are tempted to believe that what is going on at Pentecost is an event so exciting that everyone wants to join in, and thus everyone will celebrate our efforts to embrace this story's truths today, we need to note that there is resistance to what the Spirit is doing and not just on this one special day. The text says that all are amazed and perplexed at what is happening, as they say to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneer and say, "They are filled with new wine."

It is not spiritual reference. It is a word of judgment. The claim is that the people caught up in all the excitement are drunk! And it is important to note that the criticism comes not from outsiders to the faith, Roman authorities or anyone else. It comes from insiders, fellow Jews who do not understand what is going on and thus oppose it. Later, resistance will come from those who do understand and just don't like it. The issue is partly with change in general, anything new, but mostly with the specific form of change, taking faith to outsiders, Gentiles.

As we have seen in recent weeks' readings, though we might assume the Gospel is for everyone from the very beginning, this is not the perspective of many of the first disciples. They see the Jesus movement as a Jewish thing only. It takes time, courage and the provocation of the Spirit to convince Peter and many others to include Gentiles in their witness and ministry.

The implication for us in all of this is that if we get caught up in the excitement caused by the coming of the Spirit, excitement that leads to us broadening the horizons of our witness and ministry, we can expect to encounter resistance not just from outsiders, but from insiders as well; and not just from people who do not understand what we are doing, but from people who do and disagree with our discernment.

There is a common assumption in the American church that if we are doing what we are supposed to be doing, if we are doing what God wants us to do, then at least inside the church everyone will be onboard. I don't know where we got this idea, but it wasn't from the Bible. It didn't work this way for Jesus, it didn't work this way for the prophets before him or the disciples after him, why would it work this way for us?

I remember an experience which sealed my conviction that following the Spirit's leadership often inspires resistance. A church I served in another community had a wonderful after-school program that helped about ninety children each week. I didn't start it nor did I have to do much for it because there were volunteers committed to this work much like the volunteers committed to our clothing ministry.

Due to transitions in the community surrounding the church, the after-school children in my time there had become culturally diverse, about half being African-American and about half being Caucasian with a few Latino children sprinkled in. This worked just fine, the children got along well and the church was supportive. But then, I made a terrible mistake, at least in the eyes of some. I invited the children who were of a different ethnicity than us and their families to church. You would have thought I had removed one of the three persons of the Trinity! This just wouldn't do. All you-know-what broke out?

Was I wrong? No. We were trying to teach and mentor these children about life and basic educational tasks. Why would we not want

to teach them about Jesus and invite them to worship with us? Just because they had a different color of skin, a color closer to his? I don't say this categorically about many things, but I was convinced and I remain convinced to this day that it was the Spirit who was moving among us, calling us to share the Gospel in all its fullness with those children. Resistance was not a sign of having gone off-course. Quite the contrary, it was evidence of the Spirit's involvement, as it often is.

So, the excitement of this day is about the Spirit's empowerment of our efforts to extend the Gospel to more and more people. When we get caught up in this excitement, we often experience resistance and thus need to figure out a way to address it and remain true to our course. When we do, we not only extend the reach of the Gospel, we end up building community with an ever-increasing diversity of people.

The people who gather in Jerusalem come from all over the world. They come from different cultures and ethnicities, they speak different languages and have different values, they come from different walks of life. Yet they are somehow brought together by the work of the Spirit and forged into one new community. They are all Jews at this point, they have this much in common, but this too will change very soon.

The implication for us is that if we get caught up in the excitement the Spirit is stirring, we will not only include more and more people in our witness and ministry; we will include more and more people in our inner circles of friends in Christ.

This past week, as I was doing what ministers do on Monday mornings - reading through the texts for this week and prayerfully pondering the focus of this sermon - I started to feel pretty good about this matter of shaping a diverse community. I reflected on our retreat where we considered this text and had so much good energy about it. I thought about the ways we have become more diverse, not just in my time here, and I started feeling pretty good.

Then, I went to lunch at Peace China in the back of Seaboard Station. As I sat there enjoying my red curry chicken combo meal, I looked around the room and saw eight or so African-American people, men and women; about six Latino men speaking in Spanish, most of

which I understood; one man who appeared to be from somewhere in the Middle East; three or four of us Caucasian people; and the Asian family running the business. It was a wonderful image of diversity, the full spectrum of the human family happily sharing space and good food; but as I took it all in, I began to feel a bit less ecstatic about our diversity.

Why is it that a combo meal can bring people together across all differences quicker than our common ground in Christ? We know all the excuses about cultural differences and people choosing to embrace their own culture in addition to Christ. And to be fair, some of the people at Peace China stayed with their own group within the restaurant; some, but not all. But why is Sunday morning from 11:00 A.M. to 12:00 Noon still the most segregated hour of the week in America?

There are no easy answers. If there were, we would have fixed this a long time ago. There are places Christians come together – on Habitat builds, in the work the New Baptist Covenant, in after-school programs and clothing ministries – and all of this is helpful. But it's still not the kind of intimate connection we find within a church family. How do we move further toward God's vision of the beloved community?

There are no easy answers, but we begin by building one relationship at a time. In another setting, someone suggested we invite our friends who are different to come to church with us. That's a fine suggestion, but it begs a question – how many friends do we have who are different from us? That's where we begin, not with an artificial claim of being brothers and sisters, but with a genuine attempt to get to know people across all differences and allow them to get to know us.

There is a buzz of excitement on Pentecost and this is a party we want to join. The Gospel is being shared with more and more people, a whole new community is being formed and whatever resistance arises will, in time, and in God's grace, be overcome. The Spirit is being poured out in full; young and old, men and women, slave and free prophesy; and as a result, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Who wouldn't want to be a part of that?