

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
May 19, 2024

Holy Disruption

Acts 2:1-13

There's a church in Los Angeles that offers a once-a-month gathering called the Fill. According to the church's website, "We always need more of God. And the beautiful truth is that God loves to fill us with His Spirit. Thus, the Fill is a time to draw near to God through worship and prayer. As James K. A. Smith put it, 'Worship isn't just something we do; it is where God does something to us.' This night is about a real, tangible encounter with the Living God."¹

It's a long way from Los Angeles to Jerusalem. But there in the holy city, the earliest followers of Jesus experienced their own version of the Fill. They got topped up with the presence of God and began proclaiming what God had done through Christ. As remarkable as their preaching was, the day's biggest miracle was in the crowd's hearing. They heard the gospel in their own native tongues. It didn't matter where they had traveled from, or what language they spoke, the Holy Spirit was translating the good news for their ears.

And the message that entered their ears had visible effects in other parts of their bodies as well. These Pentecost pilgrims weren't just brains needing to be filled with the latest information about God. They were devout men and women whose limbs became animated by the Lord's presence. Luke doesn't detail this part, but we can guess that there were hands raised and bodies swaying. There was clapping and crying. There was shouting and singing. There was dancing and dizziness. This is what happened when God showed up.

But many bystanders and passers-by didn't recognize this as the work of God. To them, it looked more like a case of public intoxication. As far as they could tell, what they were witnessing wasn't inspiration but inebriation. Some of them joked that if you want to call this gathering the Fill, fine, but realize that what they're filled with is wine not worship.

Preacher Thomas Long tells about an occasion when he was teaching some children in a confirmation class. According to Long,

It was a very small group. In fact, there were only three young girls in the class. In one session, I was instructing them about the festivals and seasons of the Christian year, and when we came to the discussion of Pentecost, I asked them if they knew what Pentecost was. Since none of the three knew, I proceeded to inform them that Pentecost was "when the church was sitting in a group and the Holy Spirit landed on them like tongues of fire on their heads. Then they spoke the gospel in all the languages of the world." Two of the girls took this information in stride, but the third looked astonished, her eyes wide. I looked back at her, and finally she said, "Gosh, Reverend Long, we must have been absent that Sunday."²

Now granted, most Sundays here in our sanctuary don't rise to the level of excitement and exuberance that we hear about in this morning's text from Luke. When was the last time you heard anyone in the community comment that those people at Grace Baptist Church are just out of control, dizzy in the Spirit, downright tipsy with religious fervor.

Our excitement may not show up as outwardly and visibly as on the day of Pentecost, but we still want to experience the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, individually and together. We still want to be formed by the wisdom that Paul captures when he says, "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18). So we desire the kind of intoxication that comes from having God's presence poured into us. One of the ways that happens is by doing what we're doing here this morning, participating in congregational worship. As Paul goes on to say, "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (vv. 19-20).

In one respect, every Christian is a charismatic Christian, a person to whom the Holy Spirit is given to empower and enable him or her for a Christlike life, a life of faithful witness and ministry. True, different Christians have different interpretations about exactly how the Holy Spirit is manifested in the community of believers. For some, this includes working miracles of healing, speaking in tongues, and prophesying. The fact is, many of us have lots to learn from our Pentecostal brothers and sisters who remind us that being a Christian is more than just a matter of holding certain ideas and agreeing with certain doctrines. It's also about the lived experience of God's personal, powerful presence among his people, often demonstrated in visible, audible, dramatic ways.

What's more, there are many congregations that have been able to faithfully and fruitfully blend more traditional practices of worship with more expressive, celebrative styles of adoration, coupled with dramatic manifestations of the Lord's presence. This variety and diversity of Christian practices is a sign of the sovereignty of God and the freedom of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit isn't the exclusive possession of just one segment of the global church. The Holy Spirit is free to move and act in ways that dismantle our boundaries or disrupt our inclination to order and control.

William Willimon tells about a time when he participated in a congregation's self-study process. This particular church was in trouble. It was once a vital congregation in the heart of a thriving city, but was now a small group of people fighting for its life. Willimon says,

One of the exercises we engaged in was a "SWOT analysis," whereby we were asked to identify congregational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. We sailed through the first three items; this congregation, for all its difficulties, is blessed with many gifts for ministry. When we got to the last item on the list—threat—one could feel the tension rising in the room. Hesitantly, somberly, we began to list the threats, fearsome dangers that nobody really wanted to talk about; a neighborhood with declining population, shrinking financial resources, an aging building, security concerns. The spiritual energy seeped out of the room; the fear was palpable.

And then someone said, "God. Be sure to put God on the list."

What? God? A threat?

She explained, "As the church, let's remember that the biggest threat to our stability, our comfort, and our self-confidence is God. We serve a living God who just won't leave us alone, who keeps giving us impossible assignments, and who refuses to let us die a quiet, peaceful death."³

On the day of Pentecost, the God who raised Jesus from the dead poured out his Spirit on the community of Jesus' followers in order to bring forth a redeemed people who would declare his wonders to the world. This community of disciples is totally dependent upon the

Spirit for its existence and its mission. As Willimon has put it, "Without the Spirit, we're as good as dead."⁴

It's no wonder, then, that when we grow complacent, comfortable, and content with the status quo in our lives and in our church, the Holy Spirit becomes more of a threat, a force for disruption, creative disruption. The Spirit is determined to get into people and places where death is at work and bring forth new life. At first, this new life may appear chaotic. That, remember, was the concern of some in the crowd there in Jerusalem. Things have gotten a little too wild. These followers of Jesus have lost control of themselves. And there is some truth in that, not because the disciples lack restraint, but because they realize that the Spirit can't be restrained. These believers appear out of control because the Holy Spirit isn't under their control. Remember that this is the Spirit of the one who was raised from the dead. If death can't contain him, how can our contentment and complacency?

Cheryl Lawrence tells about being appointed as pastor of a network of three small churches in Rougemont, North Carolina. At one of them, during the worship services, she noticed the constant roar of motorcycles on the highway where the church was located. During her sermons and prayers, she would pause as needed to allow the noise to pass. With time, she began to wonder if God was trying to tell the congregation something. In response to the noise of the Harleys, the church put an invitation on its sign: "Bikers Welcome."

There wasn't much response at first. But eventually, the wife of a biker came and joined the church, and soon her husband did too. They became active and helped organized "Biker Sundays." According to Pastor Lawrence, "It was exciting to see empty pews filled by large bearded men wearing black leather and bandanas. The Holy Spirit was definitely blowing through this fusty, musty old church."

She acknowledged, though, that her presence seemed to make most of the bikers uncomfortable. But gradually, a few began to attend worship on a more regular basis. They even started calling the congregation "my church" on their social media postings. The most active biker member took things further by asking Pastor Lawrence to ride with the group, on the back of his Harley. Twice she scheduled a ride but then chickened out. Finally, persuaded that God was actually calling her to do this, she went on a ride. At the end, she stayed for lunch with the riders at a local tavern. They asked her to bless the food, and some even wanted to "friend" her on Facebook. Pastor Lawrence concludes by reflecting on the photos taken that day. She says, "When I look at the pictures, I am struck by the way I am grinning in all of them. Was I smiling so broadly because I was frightened out of my wits—or because I knew Pentecost was descending upon me? Or, God help me, both?"⁵

In the church's worship service on the day of her ride, Pastor Lawrence told the congregation that "the Holy Spirit brings wild and creative disruptions into the church." When Pentecostal testimonies like that come blowing into our midst, each of us, and all of us together, are challenged to consider just how open and receptive, or closed and resistant, we are to the disruptive presence of the risen Lord in our lives. How much are you and I trying to maintain control of ourselves and our church, rather than releasing ourselves to the wild and unpredictable power of the Holy Spirit, so that God can advance his kingdom, spread the gospel, and bring others into the life of his people?

This doesn't mean abandoning ourselves to chaos in our personal lives and in the life of our congregation. Note that when some in the crowds in Jerusalem voice concerns about Jesus' followers being out of control, Peter, in the text that follows, answers this complaint by announcing that what's going on is simply the fulfillment of what God promised through the

prophet Joel. God declared that the coming of his kingdom would include the pouring out of his Spirit upon all flesh, breaking down the barriers of age, gender, status, and rank. All who call upon God will be saved, and the experience of this salvation includes learning how to stay open and receptive to the disruptive, creative, life-giving Spirit of God, making things new in us and in our church, for the sake of others.

¹ <https://www.renewchurch.la/the-fill> (May 15, 2024).

² *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (April-June 1996) 34.

³ Mark Galli, *Chaos and Grace: Discovering the Liberating Work of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011) Kindle edition.

⁴ William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (April, May, June 1994) 33.

⁵ Cheryl M. Lawrence, "Pentecost and the biker church." *Faith & Leadership*. May 6, 2013.

<https://faithandleadership.com/cheryl-m-lawrence-pentecost-and-the-biker-church> (May 16, 2024).