

Pentecost Again

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

May 19, 2024 AM Sermon

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Acts 2:1-13; 19:1-7

Back when I lived in Toronto a friend talked me into visiting a Spirit filled church called the Toronto Airport Vineyard Fellowship. The church had become famous for all sorts of strange things happening out there. In 1994 Toronto Life Magazine named the church as the city's top tourist attraction. People were coming from all over the world. I don't know if there were Parthians, Medes and Elamites, but groups from France, Holland, Brazil, Israel, Korea, you name it, groups of people from all over the world showed up on any given night. Night after night thousands filled the giant Asian convention center out by the airport, now owned by the Airport Vineyard Church.

The night I visited, three days before Christmas, snow was flying and the roads were slick. Small crowd weather, my grandfather would say. But inside hundreds of lights blazed over a giant crowd jam packed into the place. We sat in back and watched. Lots to hear and see. Waves of electric holy laughter, they called it, swept back and forth across the crowd... like a wave of cheering at a football game. Individuals staggered around, apparently drunk with the Spirit. The praise band played. People sang, danced, and spoke in tongues. All this, before the actual service began. Amazed and perplexed, I couldn't help asking myself, "What in the world could all this mean?"

People reacted to that first Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit with a similar question. The day started as a routine Sunday gathering of Jesus followers. Just another day in church. But then as they were all gathered together in one place, the strangest thing happened. All of a sudden an earsplitting sound of wind up above filled the whole house. As they looked up they saw what looked for all the world like a ball of fire that dropped down what looked like tongues of fire that came to rest on each one of them. And every last one of them was filled with the Holy Spirit.

And then as the Spirit moved, each was given to speak with a heavy Galilean accent, some foreign language he or she had never learned. Where did these guys learn to speak Parthian, puzzled one of the onlookers? Elamites heard others of them preaching the resurrection of Jesus, in perfect Elamese. "Amazing... love the Galilean accent, said one of them. Each person in the crowd heard those believers preach about the Jesus-drenched wonders of God in his or her own language. Amazed and perplexed, they found themselves asking what in the world this could possibly mean.

Of course, some in the crowd offered an immediate explanation. They're all a tad beyond buzzed. And as anyone knows, a buzzed prayer meeting is a drunk prayer meeting, snickered one of them. These guys have all had a few too many. They are full of sweet wine. Drunk.

Now here at LaGrave, I can't imagine any one visiting us this Pentecost morning suggesting that we are all drunk with wine or drunk with the Spirit. Some of us have learned foreign languages in high school or university, not much speaking in tongues around here either. And holy laughter may occur out on the golf course when some unfortunate hits three balls in a row into the water. Maybe not so holy. But most people would judge us to be stone cold sober. No rockin' worship music, no prophetic words. A kink of low key stiff Calvinism.

Some would question if the Holy Spirit was moving much at all. Sometimes I like to joke that the key verse for the CRC is from Luke 19: "we didn't know that there is a Holy Spirit" What activities of the Spirit can we point to here this morning? How do we know that the Holy Spirit is at work in and among us at LaGrave? Tongues of fire. Miracles. Intoxicated with the Spirit. Where are the indications of the Spirit's activity at LaGrave? When Paul asked those twelve guys in Acts 19 if they had received the Holy Spirit when they believed and were baptized, one of them blurted out, "we didn't even know that there was Holy Spirit."

Well, most wouldn't go that far. Most of us at least realize that there is Holy Spirit. We say it in our creeds: "I believe in the Holy Spirit," or "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life who proceeds from the Father and together with the Father and Son are worshipped and glorified., who spoke by the prophets." But if someone asked if we received the Holy Spirit when we were baptized, how would we respond? What evidence could we offer?

I remember a long time ago, one of my children asked me virtually the same question. How do you know if you have the Holy Spirit? He'd read about the Spirit in the Bible and heard other people talk. But if you don't speak in tongues and have no lock down personal experience of the supernatural, how do you know? What would you say?

On the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter gives guidance to those who are ready to refer the whole bunch of those early disciples to a local AA group. Peter stands up and addresses the crowd. No, he insists. You've got it wrong. These people, strange as it may seem, are not drunk. This is what the Jewish prophet Joel talked about centuries ago.

Joel predicted that in the last days God would pour out his Spirit on all kinds of people in all kinds of ways. Today, Peter announces, is the launch of what Joel saw and promised. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Young men will see visions and old men will dream dreams. Wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below. Blood and fire and billows of smoke. This Spirit-translated prophesy about Jesus and the tongues of fire are signs of a new phase of God's worldwide saving offer and redemption plan. This is it. And this is just the beginning.

And this Pentecostal filling and energizing is not just a one day, one-time thing in Jerusalem. You can see already in the book of Acts. Even there Pentecost happens again and again. Not long after the first Pentecost kickoff, the believers are praying in Jerusalem again (4:31). And the meeting place shakes, and people there are again filled with the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit enables them to speak boldly about Jesus. And a bit later, Ananias prays over Paul and God fills him with the same Holy Spirit. About that same time God sends Peter to a Caesarea where he preaches about Jesus and right in the middle of the sermon, Pentecost happens all over yet again (10:44). While Peter is still speaking the Holy Spirit comes on his listeners and they start praising God and speaking in tongues.

And there is that passage where Paul meets these twelve guys in Ephesus (19:7). Paul asks them if they'd received the Holy Spirit when they were baptized. No they, responded. We didn't know that there is a Holy Spirit. Turns out that they had only been baptized with the Baptism of John the Baptist. John's baptism was intended to prepare you for Jesus, the coming one. You need a baptism upgrade, Paul informs them. So Paul baptizes them into the name of the Lord Jesus and low and behold Pentecost happens yet again. All twelve of them begin speaking in tongues and prophesying.

Now Reformed people have often pointed to this passage and said, "See. If you are baptized into the name of Jesus, you automatically get the Spirit." The Holy Spirit comes as part of the baptism package. Pentecostals point to the same little story and insist that only speaking in tongues proves that you have the Holy Spirit as part of the baptism package. So how do those of us celebrating Pentecost today at LaGrave know if we have the Holy Spirit. Are there any signs?

If here at LaGrave we are looking for speaking in tongues, we might find ourselves wishing for more evidence. Public speaking in tongues here at LaGrave, maybe not so much. But what about those other things. Wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below. Or young men who see visions and old men who dream dreams.

If you happened to come by LaGrave on a particular Tuesday morning you still might come across Pentecost happening yet again. I'm told that you probably won't hear the sound of a mighty wind or speaking in tongues, but the smell of Pentecost kind of hangs in the air. Pentecost smelling of grilling hamburgers with hints of unwashed feet. The Spirit turning a God given vision into reality.

Once each month, right here at LaGrave, a Holy Spirit prompted forty or fifty Jesus followers host a foot washing clinic. Sometimes more than a hundred of our neighbors stop by for lunch, fellowship, and to soak their feet in pails of warm soapy water. Young nurses and other volunteers trim toenails as needed. New socks or clean clothes are also often on the Holy Spirit's menu. All of it a Holy Spirit Pentecost sign of Jesus resurrection love extended and received. I'm told that when you stop by that foot washing clinic, if you squint a little bit, you can almost see tongues of fire on people's heads. A sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Or at Handlon prison on Wednesday evenings. Pentecost pays regular visits at the Celebration Fellowship Church. Another dream become reality. Every week a sign on the overhead there right in prison naming in thanks, LaGrave and the other churches who support and send their members into the prison. And three or four LaGravers, every week, prompted by the Spirit to live out signs of Pentecost. Worshipping,

receiving Holy Communion. And at the end of the service standing in a large circle, holding hands, singing “My Friends may you Grow in Grace.” One more indication of the Spirit’s presence.

As we listen to the Holy Spirit’s promptings. As the Spirit gives us to see visions and dream dreams. And Pentecost continues to happen again and again. Some of us may even be given to speak in tongues, or speak boldly about Jesus, or get at least a little more tipsy in the Spirit. Spirit prompted prayers for healing. Visits to the lonely. Food for the hungry. Just legislation. The dream of a Henry Beets Mission Society. Who knows what an even more Spirit filled LaGrave church might look like? Who knows where else God might take us. So have a blessed Pentecost this Sunday. Celebrate. The Spirit is present and moving here at LaGrave. Listen, obey his voice. Dream his dreams. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

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