

Title: The Messy Church
Text: Acts 2: 1 – 21
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So many of today's best-selling Christian books claim to present the Bible *clearly*. So many of our growing evangelical churches are popular for the way in which discipleship is understood *simply*. You might conclude that we live such confused lives that there is no room for complexity and ambiguity. Well if that's the case, then Pentecost should be out too! Pentecost is messy.

Some background might be in order. Seven weeks after Easter each year, Christians celebrate Pentecost. Along with Easter and Christmas, it is one of the three major Christian festivals.

Its roots are in Judaism, for Pentecost was (and still is) a Jewish festival. Occurring 50 days after Passover and linked to both Israel's agricultural cycle and her religious history, it celebrated the completion of the spring harvest and commemorated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

For Christians, Pentecost celebrates the coming of the Spirit upon the followers of Jesus some 50 days after Good Friday and Easter, fulfilling a promise made by the risen Christ. The result was the beginning of the post-Easter mission of the early Christian movement.

The story of Pentecost that we read this morning was written near the end of the first century by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke. The story is filled with richly symbolic language drawn from the Jewish tradition.

While it might not be readily obvious to us, a couple of hundred years later it was the early church leaders who first saw something of a divine reversal in the events of Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2), compared with the primeval portrayal of Babel (Genesis 11). You remember that story? At Babel the one language was confused; in Jerusalem the many languages become comprehensible. At Babel the people were scattered; in Jerusalem "every nation" comes together. At Babel earth tried building its way to heaven; in Jerusalem heaven reaches down to earth. At Babel the human ego was condemned; in Jerusalem the human spirit was renewed. At Babel we saw divine frustration; in Jerusalem we witness divine delight.

As the author tells the story, the Spirit came upon the community with the sound of a "rushing wind" and with "tongues of fire" resting on each of them. In the Hebrew Bible, "wind" and "fire" are both associated with the presence of God. In Hebrew, the same word means both "wind" and "spirit," as in the creation story where the divine wind (or spirit) moves over the primordial waters (Genesis 1:2).

Fire is also an image for the divine presence, famously seen in the story of Moses and the bush that burned without being consumed (Exodus 3:1-6). As it was at the beginning of creation and in the history of Israel, the Spirit of God was again at work creating the new community of the church.

The day of Pentecost in Jerusalem also foreshadows the harmony of heaven depicted in the book of Revelation, when every tribe and tongue gathered is around the throne. "**All nations**" are gathered: their various colors, cultures and languages retained.

Yet I find the comparison with Babel particularly intriguing. Babel represents a dazzling logistical accomplishment. Though the mythological language does not lend itself to

organizational detail, a strong central administration is suggested. Imagine hiring a prominent architect, engineers and a main contractor, who harness armies of brickmakers, bricklayers and other skilled laborers in teams that apparently work together with amazing efficiency. It would have made an interesting MBA case study; impressive for the clarity of vision, unity of purpose and efficiency of its workforce.

Yet the pattern of Babel is decisively rejected. Previously God had brought forth order out of chaos, but at Babel chaos is preferred over highly procedural order. The focused bureaucracy is destroyed. And the people are scattered with them - to work out new ways of building community and administering their common lives - in small breakout groups, rather than a plenary session.

At Pentecost, we might surmise that the central administration was less impressive. The apostles were never obviously noted for their management skills in any case, but at this point in Jerusalem they lacked vision and direction as well. There is no clear unity of purpose, except to follow the instruction from Jesus to wait in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4 and 8).

When the promised Spirit descends, it gets even messier. There is an immediate level of chaos. Is the wind blowing up a hurricane? Is the house burning? Are they drunk? -- until bewilderment moves to amazement, and the confused throng start hearing languages they are surprised to comprehend. Peter's spontaneous sermon situates him in a new position of leadership. Yet Luke stresses the democracy of Pentecost: **"all of them [the 12] were filled with the Holy Spirit"** (Acts 2:4). We read that **"All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'"** (v. 12)

The contrast between Babel and Pentecost is not a playoff between maintenance and mission. No, at both Babel and Pentecost we are witness to the lively pursuit of mission. Rather, the difference has to do with the nature of this mission.

At Babel the mission is human, the goal is measured in bricks, and success means efficiency in a strategy of design and delivery. At Pentecost the mission is not ours, the goal is immeasurable, and success continually demands shunning efficiency for the sake of seeking the least and the lost. Pentecost undermines all blueprints, all formulae, all reduction to principles. You don't learn this stuff in a seminar.

How does this relate to the season that Shepherdstown Presbyterian is in? A business school frame of reference might suggest you think in terms of "change management." I'm sure such skills are helpful, but the whole point of Pentecost is that there is no neat set of answers! The answers include living with uncertainty, holding ambiguities in tension, being patient in confusion, and questioning our tendency to streamline for efficiency. They suggest breaking out instead of reining in, reaching for ever more uncomfortable, costly diversity and generally tolerating the broad margins of messiness. Fundamentally, perhaps it is a question about *who* is in control. Which is something both Babel and Pentecost make absolutely clear. At Babel humanity makes every effort to be in control. At Pentecost is abundantly clear that humanity is *not* in control. It's a God thing. Church is messy. God is in control, and that makes the confusion OK.

In the millennia since Jesus walked with us on this Earth, we've often tried to box up the "wind" in manageable doctrines. We've exchanged the fire of the Spirit for the ice of religious pride. We've turned the wine back into water, and then let the water go stagnant and lukewarm. When we have done so, we have ended up with just another religious system, as

problematic as any other: too often petty, argumentative, judgmental, cold, hostile, bureaucratic, and self-seeking. An enemy of aliveness.

In a world full of big challenges, in a time like ours, we can't settle for a heavy and fixed religion. We can't try to contain the Spirit in a box. We need to experience the mighty rushing wind of Pentecost. We need our hearts to be made incandescent by the Spirit's fire. We need the living water and new wine Jesus promised, so our hearts can become the home of dovelike peace.

Wind. Breath. Fire. Cloud. Water. Wine. A dove. When Shepherdstown opens up space for the Spirit, and lets the Spirit fill that space within us, you'll begin to change, and you'll become agents of change. But it can be messy.

I suspect that most of you prefer to keep the change process under our control and limited to the small tinkering associated with our self-improvement projects. If you are genuinely open to the unfolding of self that is involved in transformation, you will generally encounter resistance in most of the places that you normally expect support. Families, community and culture often conspire to keep us safely in a place of conformity. Most faith communities don't like messy!

Can you be open to a change process that is not under your control? That's a good question to ask yourselves this Pentecost.

If change is to come in the deep places of our self, it must come from some point beyond our self. Attempts to make transformation into a self-improvement project simply strengthen the false self. Can you be open to the Spirit messin' with you and your church today?

Amen.

Acts 2: 1 – 21

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. **2** And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. **3** Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. **5** Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. **6** And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. **7** Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? **8** And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? **9** Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, **10** Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, **11** Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." **12** All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" **13** But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. **15** Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. **16** No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: **17** "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. **18** Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. **19** And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. **20** The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. **21** Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."