

Acts 2:1-21

2When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."
¹⁴But 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. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷In 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. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

I cannot image that morning. A great crowd of Jews from every corner of the diaspora had swelled in the streets of Jerusalem for Pentecost—Shavuot—which was (and still is) a Jewish holy day and harvest festival celebrating the giving of the 10 commandments 50 days after the Passover.

It was on this day, that the church of Jesus Christ was born. As the 12 disciples were held up together in a place by themselves, a violent wind came upon them and divided tongues as of fire landed upon them. With this, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the spirit gave them ability.

But the miracle of Pentecost was not merely a miracle of speaking; it was also a miracle of hearing. The crowd became bewildered and perplexed, for each one in the crowd could hear in his or her native language. How could these Galileans speak so clearly to ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—

The miracle of Pentecost is the miracle of Kerygma—the miracle of preaching and hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As most of you know, I'm a preacher's kid. I grew up in church; grew up hearing sermons, attending Sunday school, VBS, singing in children's choirs, attending Wednesday night dinners. I grew up in the faith of Christ Jesus. There was never a day, growing up as a child, that I didn't know I was loved by God, nor was there a story in all the Bible that I doubted.

I was a believer.

When I was about 11 years old, one of my very best friends invited me to a church camp. He was a Methodist. It was a weekend camp, and I believe it was either early spring or late fall. Either way, I remember being surprised to see ice on the ground in the morning.

That wasn't the only surprise. I had expected there to be thirty or so other kids. But there were, strangely, just three of us. If there were other children, I can't remember them. We were all great friends and we all lived in the same little neighborhood—there was David Trotter, JJ Plumber, and of course, little old me.

The counselors of the camp were actually David Trotter's older sisters—two of them. If there were more, I can't remember them. It all seemed very odd to me, this small group of us at this large and empty camp.

The two sisters had arranged a series of activities for us, meals, and Bible studies, and when the time was right, they gathered us into the chapel to tell us about the decision we needed to make. It was the most important decision we could ever or would ever make. It was the decision to accept Christ into our lives, to invite him into our hearts, and to dedicate our lives to him.

It was a decision that would have profound consequences for our lives, eternal consequences. If we accept Christ as our savior, we become his and we live with him for all eternity. If we do nothing, then

we find ourselves condemned by our sins and would be separated from all that is good and holy for all eternity.

I remember how fidgety I was through the whole thing—fidgety and excited. I had never heard about this before. All those sermons I listened to, all those Vacation Bible Schools I had attended, all those Wednesday dinners I had eaten, all those choir practices I had participated in. No one had told me this, and it excited me deeply.

I had no doubts about what the sisters had said to me. I was ready to pray the sinner's prayer, accept Jesus Christ, and become a Christian. I remember one of the sisters took notice of how fidgety I was and remarked that it must be because I had something to say—that the Spirit must be moving in me. And so I stood up and was the first among the three of us to accept Jesus into my heart. My other friends soon followed.

We had been saved.

I remember feeling rather elated and invigorated, as if something miraculous or supernatural had happened to me and I would be forever different. And so I tried to be perfect for my savior. No more cussing, I told myself. Not even the thought of a cuss word. I had to be pure, pure in heart, word, and deed, if I was going to be able to keep my salvation. I was going to have to work at it.

And I did. For about two weeks.

It was strange as to how fast my friends and I reverted back into junior high boys. Almost instantly, we were just as immature, silly, crass, and mean-spirited as ever. Had we believed anything we had said or done?

Later in life, I would grow to resent what the sisters had done that day, resent their obvious subterfuge—there was no church camp—their high-pressure evangelism tactics, and their arrogance. Despite that all of us had been raised in the church and believed in Jesus Christ, we were told that we didn't yet have the right relationship with God, that we didn't have a "personal" relationship with God. That we hadn't prayed the right prayer, or made the right decision, and until we did, we'd be far outside of God's love and grace.

If the sisters had known anything about me, anything at all, they would have found in me a deep and wonderful, vibrant faith, albeit a childish, uncritical, and simple faith. There wasn't anything that I didn't believe about Jesus and there wasn't a day that I didn't pray to my Father in heaven.

Far from instilling in me a sense of God's grace, they did much the opposite. They made me feel as if the onus of my salvation was squarely on my shoulders. It was my job to work my own salvation through

the decisions I made and through works of repentance which alone would signal to God that I was worthy of the gift of Christ.

I had to work my way to heaven. I had to earn it and deserve it. No wonder the new found faith I had was unable to survive a mere two weeks.

Nevertheless, I remain thankful for that little weekend. The feelings that welled up in my heart were powerful. It was deeply meaningful to be given a chance to proclaim my faith publically, before my peers. I felt I was owning my faith; living my faith, not merely believing something my parent's had told me.

The sisters may have had some bad theology; they may have been overzealous and little arrogant, but their intentions were good. They were also as naive and innocent as we were.

Now, I've come to appreciate some elements of evangelicalism. I believe that even progressive mainline Presbyterians like us might have something to learn from those two bugling teenage evangelists and evangelicalism more generally.

First, evangelicals have a deep appreciation for the power of the gospel, the Good News about Jesus. The gospel has a near boundless power to pierce, transform, renew and restore. It changes lives and changes our world. This is what I believe Pentecost is all about—the Kerygmatic power of the good news to carry God's own voice in the folly of our preaching and in the imperfection our hearing.

Second, evangelicals insist that the categories of sin and grace are absolutely fundamental in the proclaiming of this gospel. Indeed, they are unequivocally correct. Niebuhr's searing criticism of theological liberalism is as correct today as it was 70 years ago, that

a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.

For the gospel of Jesus Christ to retain any of its meaning and power, we must be prepared to talk about sin and our absolute dependence upon the grace of Christ Jesus.

Third, evangelicals understand the necessity for personal decision, conviction of belief, and response to the call of the gospel. They understand that the gospel makes demands on us, and without our faithful response, we're preaching and living nothing but cheap grace. There is great cost in true discipleship, and to acknowledge anything less is unworthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Fourth, evangelicals appreciate the role of the heart and emotions in religion. They recognize that without feelings and emotion, our faith can be empty, staid, and lifeless.

I am a mainline, progressive Christian. Theologically, I stand very much in the stream of the American Liberal theological tradition. There is much about evangelicalism that I don't like and I reject, particularly its penchant for biblical literalism and its tendency toward a judgmental, pharisaical form of religiosity that I believe to be wholly inimical to the gospel.

However, I know there is much, much that I have to learn from my evangelical sisters and brothers. I also can stand with them in the proclamation that the gospel of Jesus Christ saves sinners.

I love Jesus Christ. I believe him to be my savior. I believe he has shown me grace, not because I deserved it, far from it, but because of the free gift he gave this world on the cross. And I believe in the necessity of a personal relationship with God.

I know that phrase about a "personal relationship" isn't found anywhere in the Bible. But I do believe that we must encounter God in a particular and personal way that is meaningful to us individually.

All of this, I believe is what we find at Pentecost.

The miracle of Pentecost is the miracle of the Kerygmatic power of the gospel to be spoken and heard. The gospel is wonderfully, surprisingly translatable: we can hear it not only in our native language, but even in the interior spaces of our hearts, where the terrain of the spirit is unique and utterly personal.

Unlike many of my evangelical friends, I don't believe that the Pentecostal Kerygma of the gospel can be rationed out in just a few, simple steps. I don't believe it's predictable enough to be bottled up and dished out. I know that I can't give you a nice formula for a life-changing transformation. The Bible doesn't provide us with a simple formula. After all, the Bible speaks of how the Spirit moves in unexpected and unpredictable ways.

Nevertheless, I do believe that at some point in our travels on planet earth, we need very much to bury our knees in the carpet, beat our breasts, admit that we are lost in sin, and beg for God's mercy and grace. Maybe some of us need to hear that dimension of the gospel practically every Sunday.

We can become blind and lost in our own slavery to sin and we need to hear about a loving God who rescues sinners.

But, once we come to know Christ as our savior, we need to hear about other dimensions of the gospel. WE need to hear about how we have been called to be proclaimers of the good news. We need to be equipped for the mission of building the kingdom of God.

It is my hope, that you can experience both in your walk with Christ. Even Presbyterians, even mainline, progressive Presbyterians, need to be able to call themselves Pentecostal—Pentecostal in the deepest sense of believing in the power of the gospel to be proclaimed and heard by the grace of the Spirit.

We also need to be able to call ourselves evangelicals. Evangelical in the deepest, most basic sense of the word—we are to be proclaimers of the good news. We must embrace the Kerygmatic power of the gospel to transform us into new creations. And we should be passionate about such transformations.

We must be passionate about the Gospel, about the wonderful news of God's love, and that passion should compel us to share that news in word and in deed.

We progressive, mainline Presbyterians—even us liberal ones—must learn to be authentically Pentecostal and genuinely evangelical!

Amen.