

Sermon Title: Not Catcher But Caught
Text: Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17

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Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
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It's not hard to find reports of the demise of the American mainline church. I have been in ministry now for just a month short of 25 years, and well before that words of doom abounded for places like this. Harvey Cox started the bell tolling with a book in the late '60's entitled, *The Secular City*, and though he himself has all but repudiated the argument he made still people insist that in a modern world of technology and diverse culture, religion is something like your appendix: it might have been important once upon a time, but now it seems you only notice it when it gets infected!

To be sure there have been struggles in these past 25 years. The Presbyterian Church I have served, though merged with our Southern sisters and brothers, has continued to shrink in membership, and though Memorial has maintained a fairly even keel, we are not immune from the pressures. If you read the news surrounding the death of Jerry Falwell you know that *religion* has most certainly not died as some predicted it might, but it has at the least *morphed* in its influence in the world. While the mainline slowly chugs on, sleek new versions of church have charged down the pike, and some fear that they are leaving us in the dust.

This is all on my mind on Pentecost Sunday because on a *global* scale, which we so seldom find ourselves thinking on, there are sectors of the church that are, in fact, exploding. We do not see it because the growth tends to be in what we consider "Third World" countries, that actually make up two-thirds of the world's population. I get a regular stream of e-mail news reports from the World Council of Churches, and one of the things they watch most closely is the amazing growth of Pentecostal churches, especially in the Southern hemisphere: Africa and South America.

This movement, which traces its roots into the 19th century, is generally thought to have taken off in 1906, with what is known as the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles. The core of the movement is an insistence that when a believer is truly caught up in God's Spirit, there will be some clear physical manifestation of it in the believer's life. Speaking in tongues is the most notorious forms, but faith healing, or just, as our Spiritual Quests classes learn when they visit the Assembly of God church each year, a worship style that invites physical response—waving your arms in the air, speaking out or singing responses—are even more common.

It is notoriously difficult to pin down actual numbers, but Jeffrey Hadden, who teaches at the University of Virginia, suggests that Pentecostalism has grown from about 1.5 million in the 1950's to close to 10 million in the late 1990's, and other sources indicate four-fold growth in places like Brazil, Chile, and Puerto Rico.¹ In short, it is not something that can be easily ignored. I can't tell you the numbers from the 1950's but in the last twelve years Presbyterianism has gone from 2.7 million members to 2.3 million. You can do the math from there.

¹ <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/lectures/Pentecost.html>.

You don't have to worry...I do not have significant changes in mind for our worship service, and though you may not be able to tell on some Sundays, I have no intention to start preaching in tongues, but I do think there are things that deserve some thought from this intriguing explosion of Christianity. One of the most significant things I see is that it is a type of Christian practice that seems to obliterate the lines of color and class, especially as it is manifest in the United States. Though we as Presbyterians *talk* about diversity and equality of races, the truth of the matter is that the most integrated congregations in the US are Pentecostal. The international character of Pentecostalism, as well, should give us some pause. Its effectiveness is moving beyond the borders of modern geopolitics might be able to teach us something.

But I have to say as I have thought my way to this morning, and though you could not tell it by a word I've spoken yet, thought through our Scripture readings for this morning. We *do* need to be a little careful, as well. I worry that in looking to the appeal of the swift growth of Pentecostal churches and their cousins, we will mistake form for content. Twenty-five years ago, the call was to "be relevant" and in response, I suspect the church found itself buried in a swamp of issues in which its competence was limited. I suspect we undermined our truth by pushing it into forms that were not quite right for us, or at least appropriate for our real abilities. If the church today is seen as irrelevant, it is at least in part because we stepped too far in that quest for relevance. If we are tempted to "let the Spirit flow" a little more freely, to emulate what we see as success, I hope we will not find ourselves in a similar trap.

You see, the problem I fear as I ponder the story that not only under girds our worship on this Pentecost Sunday, but which lies at the heart of this phenomenon of Pentecostalism in the world around us, is that I think we can easily get confused as to whether, as the Spirit blows through our midst, we are the *catcher* or the *caught*.

What has always struck me about that day in the Upper Room is that it caught those gathered completely off guard. They had come together, to be sure, but there is nothing in the text that would suggest they knew what was about to unfold. Just before we joined the story, the remaining disciples had gathered to replace Judas among the circle of the apostles, and the only criterion applied was that they had been with Jesus along the way. There is not even a mention of baptism or signs of the Spirit—just "Where you there?" And then, when two suitable candidates were discovered it was pure chance—the drawing of lots—by which Matthias was brought into the inner circle.

They were not preparing, and they were not prepared for what would unfold as the rush of wind filled the room, and its evidence, far from providing the incontrovertible proof that these twelve were God's chosen emissaries in the world, led the crowd of onlookers to conclude only that they'd had too much wine! But the rush of wind that filled that place pushed them out into the world, and literally reshaped human history...not because they had managed to shape just the right vessels to catch this outpouring of the Spirit, but precisely because they were caught up *in* it, and allowed their voices to be shaped to just that one who needed to hear the Word that had mounted up inside them. It is not that the apostles had managed to catch fireflies in a bottle, to show to the world the truth or purity of their call, but that they themselves, touched by tongues of fire, became the glowing embers of God's love in this world.

You see, the Spirit that moved on that first Pentecost was the same Spirit that Jesus spoke of to his disciples, and the power of that Spirit does not rest in the audacity of its manifestation, but in the sincerity of its love. John had a fascinating understanding of how this Holy Spirit could and did relate to the world God was seeking to save through it. Without putting to fine a point to it, from John's perspective, the world could not handle its truth—God's movement in this world *required* a mediator, because it's truth turns all else to lie. "This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees nor knows him." But, Jesus insists, that gulf between the world and grace is overcome in *us*: "You know the Spirit because he abides in you, and he will be in you." That is the true calling of the Christian: not to be able to do all the right steps but to allow that Spirit to catch us up, and abide in us, transforming our speech, so that all might understand the goodness of God through us.

And if there is a single thought that has captivated me this week, it is that the first Pentecost story instructs us that there is literally nothing we can do to push, or force, or even predict when that Spirit will move. What we can do, if those first apostles are truly our guide, is gather ourselves, and wait attentively to the unique way in which God might be calling to us in our own day.

Throughout the season of Lent, we had these marvelous moments each day when those who wished could gather for quiet prayer and reflection on Scripture. I miss those few minutes each day....though apparently not quite enough to insist that they continue! But even as they were transpiring, I realized how seldom we gather in this way, even two or three of us, in order to be attentive to God's Spirit. We come together to *do*. We come together to *plan*. Lord knows we love to come together to *talk*. But I wonder why we so seldom give ourselves over to listening?

I've shared before the story of the writer who interviewed Mother Theresa, and was just amazed that she would spend ours a day in silent prayer. What, the writer wanted to know, could you possibly think of to say to God in all that time? Mostly, Mother Theresa replied, I listen. The strong wind and fire of Pentecost tempt us to think that God's forceful movement into this world is someone dependent on our *doing*—how we find our tongue, are catch the Spirit, so that our little light shines. But this Pentecost, I am struck by the possibility that it is not as we find ours voice, but as we make our way into the stillness, that the Spirit will eventually catch *us*, and if our hearts are open, *use* us to fulfill possibilities that are beyond our wildest hopes and dreams...that "(our) sons and our daughters shall prophecy, and (our) young men shall see visions, and (our) old men shall dream dreams."

It's not that God's Spirit does not, or cannot move through the staid old bones of Presbyterianism, but that I fear we do not sit still long enough to hear that beginning rustle of the wind, that stirs up a might roar, and will, if we attend to *it's* movement, carry us into the world to serve our God with joy...not because we finally catch the Spirit, but because the Spirit catches *us*.

Let us pray.