

Poured Out!

A sermon preached by Rev. Ginger E. Gaines-Cirelli with the Michigan Annual Conference, June 1, 2024.

Text: Acts 2:1-21

“Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.” St. Catherine of Siena, the 14th century laywoman, activist, and mystic said these words to challenge and embolden followers of Jesus. I imagine she might be discouraged to discover that you can now find them floating “along on a vast sea of comforting spiritual quotes on Pinterest...and available for purchase as a framed, floral watercolor on Etsy.¹ Don’t get me wrong, I love a pithy, meaningful quote. But framed in these ways, St. Catherine’s words become domesticated and easily misunderstood.

In St. Catherine’s context and understanding, to be who God means you to be isn’t about mastering all the self-help books or setting out on an “Eat, Pray, Love” journey of self-discovery, but rather to draw so close to God that some of the divine image—that image we are meant to reflect—begins to shine out of your perfectly unique life. And to set the world on fire isn’t to have your blog or post go viral or have your name in lights, or glowing headlines, or on everyone’s lips, it’s to spread the fire of God’s love and grace in a way that is so compelling that others’ hearts and lives are changed for the better because of you.

Once upon a time, a rather ragtag group of women and men—Acts 1:15 suggests there might have been around 120 of them—were gathered together in one place. They had been on an extraordinary journey with Jesus both before and after his death. They witnessed and participated in signs and wonders, and at this moment they are doing what Jesus told them to do (Lk 24:49); they are waiting in the city for the baptism of Spirit.

I wonder if those first disciples had any idea just what was in store. I wonder if they thought the Spirit would show up gift-wrapped or floating in with the gentleness of a dove. If so, they were wildly mistaken. Holy Spirit does pour Herself out upon the gathering—just as Jesus had promised. But this is no framed watercolor scene. Spirit comes (in the Greek) *aphno* (OFF-no)—suddenly—and *biaias* (BE-aye-ose)—mightily or even violently—think wind and fire that sets off alarms, that wakes people up, that makes you run for cover, that cannot be ignored, that requires some kind of response. Spirit comes like a wind and fire storm and fills the congregation with power and ability to not only communicate in extraordinary ways, but to be immersed in something so disruptive—so far outside the norm—that those outside the house gather around to see what in the world is going on.

What would it take for those outside our houses of worship to become that curious about what was going on with us? What kind of fire would have to get into our bones to cause that kind of stir? On the first day of Pentecost, Spirit blows into the house and sets the disciples on fire so that they begin proclaiming God's deeds of powerful, liberating love, mercy, justice, and peace in ways that everyone could understand. This proclamation, this good news of the Kin-dom is not just a message of hope for one tribe but is poured out to draw all people into a place of greater dignity and flourishing, oppressor and oppressed, poor and rich, persons of every conceivable design, location, and station. Spirit is poured out upon all flesh, making no distinction because of flesh color, language, sexual orientation, gender identity, culture, political leanings, or any other thing.

The Kin-dom vision is one where things that divide and set us at enmity are burned down; where the twisted, learned perceptions that blind us to the humanity and beauty of others are cut away like cataracts; where the layers of resentment, hatred, prejudice, and greed are blown away as in a destructive, Oklahoma tornado. And what is left, the ashes and the wounds and the destruction, provides the raw material and necessity for new creation. The Spirit who moved across the waters to bring order and life out of chaos blows through like a mighty storm to stir and move us to do something. I am not suggesting that God causes violence or desires

it, but rather that Spirit's power flows to make all things new. And that means things are changed, really changed.

The Pentecost miracle is that for a bright, shining moment, the people of God were who God meant them to be—available to a disruptive and surprising Spirit, filled with love and courage and freedom, and instrumental in a great conversion of the wider community to love and justice and generosity and peace and mutuality and the formation of a new community with those things at the center.

The Pentecost miracle isn't something that happened once a long time ago. It is an ongoing miracle—that even with all the ways that the human family gets it wrong down through the centuries, Spirit continues to touch hearts, to disrupt the *status quo* of our lives and communities, to stir people to gather, to empower once timid followers to take risks for the sake of the Gospel. At least one part of the ongoing Pentecost miracle is that the church continues to exist at all with the mess we've made of it over and over again.

Though the church's survival shouldn't surprise us since, from the very beginning, there were forces who stood in opposition, forces and voices who sneered and jeered, who saw barriers broken and, instead of celebrating the amazing beauty of a

diverse human family sharing an experience of God's liberating and reconciling love, labeled what was happening as bad behavior, they assigned blame, twisting this beautiful moment into debauchery. And yet this perversion of the truth could not stop the life and community-creating power of Spirit from flowing—not then, and not now.

We have been—I would suggest for some years now—experiencing a fresh Pentecost in the United Methodist Church—a moment when Spirit is setting off alarms, waking people up, stirring discomfort, disrupting what has been, creating confusion and concern, leading people into new configurations of community, inspiring boundary-crossings among persons used to dwelling in discrete tribes, and empowering once timid Jesus followers and justice-seekers to stand up, to take a risk, to speak out about the love and grace of God and the imperative for inclusion and justice in the church.

As important as that is, it only matters if all that energy moves outside our walls. The point of the first Pentecost was not for a group of disciples to have an extraordinary spiritual experience they could talk about among themselves until they died. It was not to provide a great story to pass down to their children until their children no longer wanted to hear it. The point of Pentecost is not to be a pep

rally for the already initiated to feel warm feelings in their comfortable sanctuaries or to inspire the church to celebrate itself. The point of Pentecost isn't—at the end of the day—about a denomination figuring itself out. We are missing the point of Pentecost if we fail to remember that it's about being and becoming who we are called to be so that we *set the world on fire* with the love and compassion and mercy and justice of God!

Can we organize as powerfully to address poverty as we organize to get delegates elected? How will we use our collective creativity, ingenuity, resources and energy? People are drowning in loneliness, depression, and anxiety, starved for meaning and purpose and some humanizing, grounding influence in their lives. People are hungry for lack of food, suffering from lack of healthcare, living in fear of violence of all kinds. And our planet and its plants and animals gasp for air. What are we going to do about it? Because if not us, who? If not now, when?

United Methodists are known to be a “get it done” kind of people. When we decide to move together toward a goal, we know how to mobilize and move the needle on things that matter. But a dear colleague said something to me last week that caught me up—she said, “As the large church, we're very good at wishful thinking.” Her worry is that we will miss the urgency of now, the possibility in this fresh

Pentecost moment by failing to make the Kin-dom vision concrete. *Right now* the world needs us as the United Methodist Church to be who we are meant to be and to concretely participate in God's mending of our beautiful, broken world.

We are not without help! That ragtag bunch all those years ago didn't develop a 10-point plan and a comms strategy for spreading the love, mercy, and justice of God as they sat in the house in Jerusalem. The church didn't explode in numbers because of human ingenuity or a well-crafted mission statement. It exploded because of the new-life giving power of God's love, manifest in Spirit. That power has continuously stirred and stormed to help the church rise up and keep going, to create new ways of connecting, to be brave and foolish for love and justice, to let others laugh at our hope, to boldly proclaim God's love and mercy and compassion even in the face of hatred and violence of all kinds. It's the power that gives passion to the prophets, that calms the seas, that fuels forgiveness and humility, that lifts up the lowly; it's the power that tears down literal and relational walls, inspires the greatest music and art, gives words to those who fear having nothing to say, brings new life out of ashes and resurrection even from the cross.

I can't help but remind us of the overused but ever-powerful words of Annie Dillard who calls us in with this challenge: "On the whole, I do not find Christians,

outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.”¹

Is Annie Dillard's suspicion correct? Does no one believe any of this? Do we believe that the Holy Spirit has been poured out on all flesh and that we are all tinder, just waiting to go up in flames of love, praise, commitment, proclamation, and action? Do we believe that Spirit has the power to shake us from the *status quo*, from the familiar paths, from the unjust systems, from our desperate need to control the journey? Are we “sensible of conditions?”

The story says the people were “on fire” with Spirit. From that first day of Pentecost right down to this very moment, Holy Spirit is at work in and through those who seek even in frail and faltering ways to follow Jesus. And that means that Holy Spirit is poured out upon you and upon me. And Spirit will take all the

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*

broken pieces—the ash, the wounds, the destruction—and guide each one of us to the place where our particular passion, gifts, and energy will best serve the dream of a new creation and a healed human family no longer enflamed with hatred and violence and fear, but on fire with love and compassion and with ears to hear, eyes to perceive, and hearts to understand the gifts of this life and of life together.

What can you do right now? Follow Spirit's lead and connect to the place where your passion serves others. The way to begin is to *begin*. That means start where you are. Do what you can do. Have the hard conversation. Put your dreams into some shareable form. Be sensible of conditions. Take the inspiration and encouragement and knowledge that you've gained in these days to all the places you live and serve and trust that what God brings you to God will bring you through.

I once heard this definition of miracle: it's not when God's actions align with our desires, but when our actions align with God's desires. That's the kind of miracle that seems worthy of our contemplation. And that's the Spirit-instigated Pentecost miracle. So if you want to be a part of it, don your crash helmets, grab a signal flare, fasten your seatbelt, and get in on whatever amazing thing Spirit is stirring in

and through us for the sake of the new creation and promise that is to come. Let's be who God means for us to be and—together—set the world on fire!

¹ Br. Jordan Zapac, O.P., <https://www.dominicanajournal.org/a-patron-for-pyros/>