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**“The Sprit-Filled Church”**  
A sermon by Mindy L. Douglas

**Day of Pentecost (Year C)**  
**May 15, 2016**  
Acts 2:1-21

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Some years back, ABC news anchor Peter Jennings interviewed John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard Christian Fellowships. In the interview, Wimber shares that the he first attended church as an adult and he came in expecting dramatic things to happen. He visited several Sundays in a row and found himself getting frustrated. After the service was over, he went over to an official-looking man and asked him, “When do they do it?”

“Do what?” the man replied.

“The stuff,” Wimber answered.

“What stuff?”

“The stuff in the Bible.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, multiplying loaves and fish, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind. That stuff.”

“Oh,” the man replied apologetically, “we don’t do that. We believe in it, and we pray about it. But we don’t *do* it.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley P. Saunders and Charles L. Campbell, “What Does This Mean? . . .” *Journal for Preachers*, vol. XIX, no. 4, Pentecost 1996, p. 3.

*“We believe in it, and we pray about it. But we don’t do it.”* Do you know of churches like this? Where the gospel seems to have gotten lost in the routine? Where the power and presence of Jesus Christ has faded to the point where all the right words are said and all the right songs are sung, but without passion, perhaps—without energy—without heart—without hope. I have known churches like that, and you feel it when you walk in the door. The air is heavy and it is almost *work* to be there. There is no real sense of the future—hardly a good sense of the present. The weight of the past is in these places—heavy, dim, without hope, and without action.

Perhaps this is not unlike what the disciples were feeling at the beginning of our passage for today. After all, their energy was in the past, in Jesus, and he was gone now. At least physically. He had ascended. They gathered for the traditional Jewish feast of Pentecost, but their hearts were not in it, for surely they wondered, what now? Who will take care of us now? Who will lead us now?

For three years they had walked the dusty roads together with Jesus, watching the astonished faces of the crowds as he preached, taught, healed, and offered forgiveness. They had listened in amazement as he befuddled belligerent lawyers. They sat at his feet while he opened the scriptures and introduced them to the God they only *thought* they’d known. They saw him touch the untouchable, feed the hungry, care for the outcast, and heal every kind of need. They’d seen his heart break over and over again in concern for the ways people misunderstood and misrepresented God. They had seen him transform faith from a perfunctory adherence to the law into the way, the truth, and the life.<sup>2</sup>

But Jesus was not beside them in the same way anymore—he had left in a cloud. He had told them weeks earlier that the Holy Spirit would come to be with them, but they had no idea what that meant or what it would be like or when and how it would happen. So they carried on with things best they could, and when Pentecost arrived, the disciples and over one hundred and thirty others were in one place together, trying to act as if nothing had changed, as if Jesus was just on a well-

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<sup>2</sup>From a paper written by friend and colleague Bill Klein for my preachers’ group, *Lectio Jubilate*, 2004. He is the pastor at Lexington Presbyterian Church in Lexington, VA. I am grateful for his good and faithful work.

deserved vacation for a week or so. “Act natural,” they whispered to one another, completely and totally aware that without Jesus nothing was natural.

And then it happened.

Then it happened and it turned out to be something that even Luke had trouble putting into words. Barbara Brown Taylor describes it like this:

It starts with a sound like the rush of a violent wind . . . and it fills the entire house where Jesus’ followers are sitting. Then it bursts into tongues like flames above their heads, but when they open their mouths to shout, “Watch out! Your head’s on fire!” that is not what comes out. [The Spirit] comes out instead, speaking languages that none of those Galileans ever learned, so that perfect strangers from the four corners of the world have to tell them it is God they are talking about—God and God’s deeds of power—the latest of which is now featuring them, behaving so bizarrely under the power of God’s spirit that the only paradigm some bystanders can come up with is *drunk*.<sup>3</sup>

They are not drunk. Peter sets everyone straight on that. He’s been pretty quiet up ‘til now, but no longer. Now the preacher steps forward, unaware, probably, that he is even preaching. He is just saying what is on his heart. He is just responding to the sheer depth and height and breadth of the situation. He is just responding to the Holy Spirit as it moves within him.

“Listen to what I say, all you people in Jerusalem. These are not drunk—it is only nine in the morning! These are becoming the embodiment and the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Joel, when the sons and the daughters prophesy, and the old men see visions, the young men dream dreams.”

“What does it mean?” the people ask in verse 12. It means, Peter explains, that nothing will ever be the same. It means that what Jesus has done is for everyone,

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “God’s Breath,” in *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2003, p. 39.

not just for the Galileans. It means that Jesus is now living in all who call upon his name. It means the Holy Spirit is with them.

The first question the people ask is “What does it mean?” The second question, in v. 37, is perhaps more telling. The people ask, “What should we do? “Peter’s congregation that day rightly understands that the Christian faith is not primarily about beliefs or about ideas or doctrines. It is about a way of living.”<sup>4</sup>

Pastor P.C. Ennis tells the story from a church he served some years ago:

One of the finest compliments I remember receiving [he writes] was . . . a phone call from a woman I did not know. Her language was poor, but she made herself plain. Her little boy was starting school. He had bad eyes, was told he needed glasses, but there wasn’t enough money for glasses. She had called another church, actually a church much larger and more affluent than the church I was serving at the time, but she said, “They told me to call you, because, they told me, your church *did* that kind of thing.”<sup>5</sup>

His church believed in it, prayed about it, and did that kind of gospel thing, too.

The Holy Spirit was in that place and everyone within eyesight saw it, anyone who could hear heard it, anyone who was open to feeling anything felt it.

The Holy Spirit is here now, as well. Sure, none of us are speaking in other languages or running around with our heads on fire. But the Holy Spirit is here now. I know because I have seen the Holy Spirit at work. I know you have, too.

The Holy Spirit is here, moving in and among us, causing us, in the name of Jesus Christ to be transformed, to be pulled out of our comfort zone, to do odd things in the name of love, to do radical things in the name of peace. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we work to “be” the place that does all that “stuff” in the Bible, you know, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, loving our neighbor. When the Holy Spirit comes upon us as symbolically displayed

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<sup>4</sup> P.C. Ennis, “God’s Odd,” *A Journal for Preachers*, v. XX, no. 4, Pentecost 1997, p. 35.

<sup>5</sup> P.C. Ennis, “God’s Odd,” *A Journal for Preachers*, v. XX, no. 4, Pentecost 1997, p. 37.

through water dripping through our hair and down our necks, we are called to be a part of this new family of people who do things differently.

The rest of the world doesn't always get it. You see, the Holy Spirit causes us to make sacrifices that other people shake their heads at. The Holy Spirit gives us the ability to forgive hurts that others would never consider forgiving. The Holy Spirit causes us to love people that others believe are not worthy of love. The Holy Spirit causes us to give away our resources because we know that we have more than we could ever need and because others are going without. The Holy Spirit causes us to see others as God's created children, rather than calling names that create judgments (black, white, disabled, foreign, fat, skinny, gay, trans, poor, old). You see, the Holy Spirit enables us to love one another in such a profound and sincere way that people begin to gather, begin to peep into the doors and the windows because they want to know more about us and about this love. You see, with the Holy Spirit, we are given the power to be the ones doing life a little bit differently, ruled by love rather than by our own self-interests. We are called to live the loving life, the humble life, the giving life, the odd life.

And just in case we were sure we couldn't do it on our own, God sent us the Holy Spirit so that we wouldn't have to, and it is the same Spirit who has come to us and led us to this place at this time, to be the church here, First Durham, the church now, the church of today and the church of hope for tomorrow, the church that opens its doors to all who want to enter, the church that seeks in every way to live the gospel in the world, in our lives.

So, what does a Spirit-filled church look like? Like us, I think, on our best days. Like the church we are dreaming we can be together. Like this gathering right here, right now.

And so we cry out: "Come Holy Spirit! Fill us. Challenge us. Guide us. Lead us. Now. Always."

In the name of the Creator, and the Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.