

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
May 19, 2013 Pentecost
©2013

Ordinary Extraordinary

Acts 2:1-18, 23-24, 37-41 (from Eugene Peterson's The Message)

1 When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force - no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. 3 Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, 4 and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them. 5 There were many Jews staying in Jerusalem just then, devout pilgrims from all over the world. 6 When they heard the sound, they came on the run. Then when they heard, one after another, their own mother tongues being spoken, they were thunderstruck. 7 They couldn't for the life of them figure out what was going on, and kept saying, "Aren't these all Galileans? 8 How come we're hearing them talk in our various mother tongues? 9 Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; Visitors from Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene; 11 both Jews and proselytes; Even Cretans and Arabs! "They're speaking our languages, describing God's mighty works!" 12 Their heads were spinning; they couldn't make head or tail of any of it. They talked back and forth, confused: "What's going on here?" 13 Others joked, "They're drunk on cheap wine." 14 That's when Peter stood up and, backed by the other eleven, preached with bold urgency: "Fellow Jews, all of you who are visiting Jerusalem, listen carefully and get this story straight. 15 These people aren't drunk as some of you suspect. They haven't had time to get drunk - it's only nine o'clock in the morning. 16 This is what the prophet Joel announced would happen: 17 "In the Last Days," God says, "I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people: Your sons will prophesy, also your daughters; Your young men will see visions, your old men dream dreams. 18 When the time comes, I'll pour out my Spirit On those who serve me, men and women both, and they'll prophesy. ... 23 Jesus, following the deliberate and well-thought-out plan of God, was betrayed by men who took the law into their own hands, and was handed over to you. And you pinned him to a cross and killed him. 24 But God untied the death ropes and raised him up. Death was no match for him.... 37 Cut to the quick, those who were there listening asked Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers! Brothers! So now what do we do?" 38 Peter said, "Change your life. Turn to God and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins are forgiven. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 The promise is targeted to you and your children, but also to all who are far away - whomever, in fact, our Master God invites." 40 He went on in this vein for a long time, urging them over and over, "Get out while you can; get out of this sick and stupid culture!" 41 That day about three thousand took him at his word, were baptized and were signed up.

You know what the secretly grandiose preacher's favorite line in this story is, don't you? Amidst this amazing story of the spirit powerfully energizing a group of still-confused, still-dispirited, still-sad group of disciples into the beginnings of the most powerful organization the world has known, amidst the astounding story of the tongues spoken that all were miraculously able to understand, amidst Peter's stirring evoking of

the prophet Joel's words about the young having the courage to dream and the old confident enough to have visions – amidst all of this, the favorite line of the secretly grandiose preacher is that very last one: *"That day,"* in response to Peter's short sermon, *"about three thousand [people] took him at his word, were baptized and signed up."* Ooh, I can just imagine! And I am grandiosely envious. You see, I secretly envision the Spirit working so powerfully through **my** words that one simple sermon would yield hundreds, thousands of folks. I can see them in my mind's eye, lined up from here to I-25, snaking their way to the church to come to hear such a powerful preacher. OK. It is little grandiose, isn't it? Or maybe a lot. It's similar to a fantasy I sometimes have about being on an airplane and – like that old, original movie "Airplane" – both of the pilots get sick and I – with my handful of hours of private pilot experience, have to take over and I successfully land that plane to the applause and accolades of all. The reality of course is that if you ever have occasion to go on an airline flight with me, you should be very glad that the chance of that scenario is infinitesimally small, because in reality the outcome just wouldn't be nearly so rosy.

Alright. Secretly, self-absorbed preacherly grandiosity aside, I love the Pentecost story because of its drama, its spark, its sizzle. Because it is fantastic story, full of razzle-dazzle, full of something happening that's bigger than life. And we like razzle-dazzle, don't we? It perks us up, heightens our senses, gets the adrenalin flowing. Witness the success in these last years of all those television shows about "extreme sports," events and activities that push the meaning of "sports" to its limit and are edgy and sizzle-y. After all, no one produces a television show about playing shuffleboard. And yet, if we're not careful, we can make a mistake here. We can think that the Spirit of God that animates and gives life and transformation **only** works in big, splashy dazzling ways. Now sometimes, God does just that. But I also found compelling the story a preacher by the name of Jeffrey Kemper; listen to his words:

“When I was a kid,” he writes

*I had a friend whom I was very close to. Her parents were divorced, and her father was not [around] very much. He’d show up sometime around Christmas and... her birthday with wonderful presents – things ...I could only dream of. One day, after the Christmas delivery, overcome by... shallowness... I said to her, I wish I had your dad! ... She replied indignantly, “You don’t know how lucky you are to have a father who is always there for you, always there in **ordinary** life, to do **ordinary** things with you. “I might get big gifts, but I don’t have a dad who is **ordinarily** there.” That gave me a new appreciation of my father, and his rather extraordinary – ordinary love.¹*

Or the great Disciples preacher Fred Craddock tells the story of how when he was a teenager he went to a week of summer church camp. On the final night of that camp, around the campfire, they were invited to give their lives to Christ by becoming ministers or missionaries. But let me let Dr. Craddock finish the story in his own words:

I went back to the dorm and I lay on my bunk and said to God, “I’m able.” ... [A]nd I pictured myself running in front of a train and rescuing a child, swimming out and getting someone who was drowning. ... [Or up] against a gray wall and some soldier saying, “One last chance to deny Christ and live” ... [and] I confessed my faith and they said “Ready, aim, fire.” Later, a monument is built [to me.]

But then Dr. Craddock concludes: while “I was sincere then... nobody warned me that I could not write one big check. I’ve had to write [a lifetime] of little checks: 87 cents, 21 cents, a dollar three cents.”²

The story of that first Pentecost is the story of something obviously extraordinary.

¹<http://www.mtsm.org/preaching/homilies.htm> Emphasis mine.

²Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, eds. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), p. 155.

It was a big thing. It was spectacular. It sizzled. And we thank God for doing that extraordinary thing that made possible, two thousand years later, our congregation here on the corner of Platte and Cascade. But our lives, your life and my life and the life of this church, are made up of much more ordinary things; our lives, to use Dr. Craddock's image, consist not of writing one, huge spectacular spiritual check, if you will, metaphorically the size of those given to the Powerball winners, but in the more ordinary, everyday expenditures of our time, our talent, our resources, our compassion, our caring, our love, our patience – expenditures given in small, ordinary portions but which indeed do and have done nonetheless extraordinary things. Hear again what Reverend Kemper has to say in this regard:

*Maybe we don't have driving winds to show the Spirit's presence, and maybe we don't have the razzle-dazzle of tongues of flame, and maybe we don't have the word of salvation proclaimed in tongues to people on the street. Maybe that's because once the Holy Spirit got the Church jump started, that Spirit would choose to work in more regular, ordinary ways. These ordinary ways are not signs of the Spirit's weakness.... They may well be signs of the Spirit's **power**, which can accomplish extraordinary things, in quite ordinary ways. Where then, can we find the Holy Spirit at work?³*

Where, then, can we find the Holy Spirit at work? In so many “ordinary” places indeed, in so many place where one person, one small group, does something under the influence of the Spirit of God that shows the Gospel, that changes lives, that offers healing and hope. They are not the sort of things that you would build a monument to, perhaps; they may not sizzle; they may lack tongues of fire and rushing winds – but they are nonetheless the sort of things that show the Spirit at work in the lives of those who count themselves gratefully as part of Christ's church begun on that

³<http://www.mtsm.org/preaching/homilies.htm> Emphasis mine.

first Pentecost so long ago. Can you begin to think with me of some examples of such “ordinary extraordinary” fruits of the Spirit? I can:

- I am reminded of story of the small town restaurant owner in the deep South, two generations ago, who agonized over the fact that in keeping with the customs of that day and place he curtained off the back section of his restaurant and would only serve Black folks there and who said “if I take that curtain I may lose my livelihood, but if I don’t take it down I will lose my soul” – and so he took it down.⁴ So ordinary, but so extraordinary. The power of the Spirit....
- I am reminded of the story of a little New England church which was doing a building program, because the whole building badly needed renovation. But when the pastor was asked by a friend about how the renovation was going she said this: *“Oh, we ran out of money before we got to the sanctuary.”* Now, her friend wondered what could be more important than the sanctuary but he had the good sense to keep his question to himself as she went on to say, *“You know, we have a shelter there for homeless men. We put in new showers and renovated the old kitchen.... On the Sunday before the shelter opened, the worship service began as usual in the sanctuary. When it came time for communion, the people carried the bread and the cup downstairs to the basement. The whole congregation gathered around the empty beds. They passed the bread and the cup around the circle. The body of Christ given for you. That night the shelter beds were full, and the [sanctuary] still needed a lot of work.”* So ordinary, but so extraordinary. The power of the Spirit....

⁴Fred B. Craddock, Craddock Stories, Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, eds. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001)

In the opening chapter of Second Timothy, Paul writes these words to Timothy: *"I am grateful to God.... when I remember you.... for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power...."* God worked through Timothy in ordinary but extraordinary ways, God worked through that restaurant owner in the deep South, and through that little church in New England whose sanctuary remains undone but who wrote a small but powerful check, to use Dr. Craddock's metaphor, that the homeless might be fed and safe and warm. *"I am grateful to God when I remember you...."* My friends, on this Pentecost, whom are you grateful to God for because he or she has shown you the Spirit of God in ordinary and yet extraordinary ways? In fact, I want you, if you wish, to take out a pen or one of those pencils in the pew backs, and call to mind one name for whom you are grateful, in whom the Spirit has moved, for whom you are better because he or she lived. And write that name down in the margin of your bulletin. Now think of another name. And write it down as well. I'm going to give a moment to do that.

My friends, take those bulletins home and put them on your refrigerator or your dresser or wherever you will see them this week. Hold those names close to your heart each morning when you get up this week. And give thanks to God for their lives. Give thanks that the Spirit worked its power in them in ordinary extraordinary ways. Give thanks that, indeed, God did not give them a spirit of timidity but such a spirit of power that they yet live in you. Or as our closing hymn later this morning says, *"Spirit, Spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness, calling and free."* May that Spirit blow through your life and mine and the life of this congregation in ways that are indeed both extraordinary and ordinary. May it be so. Amen.