

# The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Bill White

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May 23, 2010 Pentecost Sunday

Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



## The Sermon Text — Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

But 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. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

"In 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.

Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.

And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

The sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood,  
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious  
day.

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

## SERMON

Most of us think that we know a little bit about God, the Creator, and Jesus, the Son, but we are not sure we know much about the Holy Spirit. That may be true, but we do know something about what the Spirit does. We know about spirit. We experience spirit in a variety of ways. One aspect is what we call, team spirit. It is what helps a team to work together. Even if you are just watching, you can sense and feel a game where there is team spirit.

Spirit can be experienced in many areas outside of sports. You can experience team spirit in the choir, or working on a project. Perhaps it is a project where you are paid, or maybe you are a volunteer. When people work together, when

they give their best, feel a rush and excitement, they experience Spirit.

Years ago I ran for public office. I had a great team: we had artists, planners, people who phoned, folks who raised money, others who did research, and still others who accompanied me as I went door to door. Though I was a relative stranger in the community I shook hands, debated, developed position papers and against great odds we won. What a thrill. What fun we had. We had great spirit. Of course, once the election was over reality set in. Now I had to serve.

You can experience Spirit at a concert, or listening to a speech. It can take place with only a handful of people. We attended the Lion King recently and the response of the audience to the animals parading in at the very beginning was terrific. Though we were back quite a ways we all cheered when the giraffes bent forward and nearly kissed those in the front row. It was fun to see a good musical with others. We had a sense of Spirit. When this happens we feel terrifically uplifted.

Pentecost is not just talking about Spirit, it is about Holy Spirit, and we know that some experiences of Spirit are a long way from Holy. The raunchy cheers from the student section at a UW football game are evidence of spirit, but not Holy Spirit. The angry cries from a mob trashing stores and homes, is a long way from holy.

Pentecost is a celebration of Holy Spirit. Since the Holy Spirit is one of the ways we meet, know and experience God, Pentecost is a celebration of God. It is the celebration of a God who not only gathers, heals, reconciles, informs, and softens hard hearts, but brings down kings and presidents, humbles the powerful, and changes the course of history in mysterious and powerful ways. Pentecost invites us to know and declare the truth.

Peter in his Pentecost speech suggests that an experience with the Holy Spirit often begins when we are truth tellers. "And in the last days it shall 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." When he explains that young and old alike, men and women will see visions and dream dreams, he means that they will tell us where God is leading us. They will tell us God's truth. This is not so much predicting the future as it is telling us the consequences of cheating, lying, or depriving people of their rights.

There are at least three symbols for the Holy Spirit, and they point to very different aspects of this festival. The dove, often seen as a descending dove, is a symbol of the gentle, healing, nurturing nature of God. For the past few years Mr. Chet Howard has brought his doves here to help us celebrate that aspect of Pentecost.

Two other symbols we associate with the day of Pentecost, however, are a bit more powerful -- wind and fire. Both are unpredictable and strong. Both are like a two edged

sword, offering wonderful gifts, as well as a terrifying experience. Fire can warm us, or burn our houses to the ground. Wind can cool us, or uproot the trees in our yard. These two symbols remind us that trying to control the Spirit of God is like trying to lasso a tornado, or put lightning in a bottle.

At the time of his baptism the Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove. Jesus was gentle, caring, and had the Spiritual gift of healing. He touched the eyes of a blind man, and restored his sight. He welcomed little children, and invited old women to touch him. But just the moment we think that Jesus was always meek and mild we see him confronting people who oppressed the poor or exposed those who lied. There are several names for this kind of spirit work, but the most common Biblical name is: Prophecy.

Many people, including me, prefer to choose one symbol or the other, not both. If things go well for us, if we like our lot in life, we prefer to have the Spirit of gentleness, the Spirit of grace, and peace and comfort.

If you think life is unfair, or unjust, you want the world turned upside down. You want revolution, or something just short of revolution. Since things are not good the way they are, you want change. You want the Spirit to blow change.

On the day of Pentecost over a hundred disciples were gathered in a small compound near the temple in Jerusalem. They were obeying orders from Jesus who told them to go home and wait. That morning something awesome took place. Suddenly there was a sound, so loud that it might be described as tornado-like. Then there was a light, something that looked like a tongue of fire, and it was resting on the head of each person. Suddenly all the disciples began to speak in their Galilean dialect, but those who gathered heard it in their own language. It was like they were at the UN listening to simultaneous translations. They all understood. If you were from Egypt you heard the voices of people in Egyptian. If you were from Syria, it was in the Syrian tongue. In wonder the writer says, "Even Cretans and Arabs," which indicates that God is bigger than the biases of his people.

The whole scene was so crazy that many couldn't figure it out. It was so disorderly and loud that some even suggested that the disciples were drunk. Peter had to give a little speech and set the record straight. Listen, these folks aren't drunk, they haven't had time to get drunk, it is only nine o'clock in the morning. This is what the prophet Joel announced would happen:

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 and your old men dream dreams.

Barbara Brown Taylor, acknowledged to be one of our country's top preachers, tells about attending a Pentecostal church in Memphis. The service began slow, but it picked up steam in the second hour, and really cut loose in the third. Women sprang to their feet and sang solos. One woman danced in the front of the church before she started jerking. Another ran around the perimeter of the church twice.

She writes: I felt like I was caught in the middle of a thunderstorm, so I did what you are supposed to do: I made myself small and held perfectly still. Lightning did not strike me, which was an answer to my prayer, but in the months since

then I have wondered about my reaction. Was it simply a reaction to that kind of worship or was it more than that? If I had been in that room on the first Pentecost day, would I have done the same thing? "Oh God, if you are about to pour out your Spirit and this is what it looks like, would you please skip me?"

Would that be your prayer if the Spirit broke loose this morning? Spare me from this excitement? What would happen if people began to dance and celebrate? Would we call for the ushers or the police? We have people who stare at little children who make a tiny bit of noise in church. Can you imagine what would happen if someone started shouting alleluia?

At Pentecost God was turning the old order upside down. God was pouring out his Spirit upon all flesh. ALL. It was no longer the old men, the old power brokers who would set the agenda. Now the young began to see visions, and to dream dreams. It was not just males who would be instruments of God, young men and young women. Finally, it was not just the wealthy – even your slaves, men and women will speak for God and tell the truth. We all saw that prophecy come true in the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s.

On the first Pentecost they told the truth about the use of power. They challenged the forces that controlled life in Israel. Today the truth tellers may talk to us about immigration, and how the strangers in our communities are children of the most high God. They might tell the truth about those who make huge profits at the expense of the rest of society.

Or they may tell the truth about the churches in our world. We can see that God is changing the power base of the churches. Those who were once on top, the mainline churches, are losing membership, while those who were on the bottom, the evangelicals and Pentecostals, are being lifted up. The only churches that are growing in the Church of England are the non-traditional. God is stirring the pot.

Evangelical and Pentecostal members enthusiastically invite friends and neighbors to join them at worship. We are told that the typical Lutheran invites someone to church every eight years. Too many of us are like the woman in the Pentecostal church praying to God that the Spirit pass over us. It is time to pray that God includes us when the Spirit blows change.

God comes to us in many ways. In sickness, in times of distress, God comes to us like a dove, bringing peace and tranquility to our troubled hearts and minds. Let not your hearts be troubled he says.

In times of prosperity and privilege God comes to us like wind and fire, turning our worlds upside down, bringing us down when we act like the mighty on their thrones and lifting us up when we are lowly. This is no time for us to pray: God keep everything just the way it is, I can't handle change. Rather, this is a time when God wants us to go with the Spirit, to embrace the wind, and to fan the fires. This is a time to say: Come Holy Spirit and claim your church. Bring us power and truth, and conviction, and let me be a part of whatever you are doing. Amen. © 2010