

“A Disruptive Force and a Heartwarming Fire”  
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost A  
By Rev. Dr. Judy Kincaid  
*Acts 2:1-21*

My oldest child, Eli, is 22 years old. It doesn't seem possible that he is all grown-up now. Time goes so fast. I remember when he was just three years old. I was so excited to have a little one that I volunteered to be his Sunday school teacher. It might have been a mistake to try and teach Biblical concepts to three-year-olds. I did the best I could. Each week, I took the gospel lesson and I tried to find something simple and concrete to convey to the children. I used visual aids. When Jesus said, “I am the vine and you are the branches” I brought grapes on a vine. When he said, “I am the good shepherd,” I brought toy sheep and we acted out taking care of them and keeping them safe.

Things went pretty well until I tried to explain Pentecost. I explained that the disciples were all gathered together in one place and there was a loud rushing wind and tongues of fire landed on their heads. There were people there from different regions and all of them were speaking different languages, but the Holy Spirit made it so that they could all understand each other. Three thousand people were baptized that day. They healed the sick, they fed the poor, they took care of each other and they loved Jesus.

They taught other people to love Jesus and their numbers grew and grew.

I wanted something concrete to show the children. I needed a visual aid. Children love cake and I was taught that Pentecost is the birthday of the church. So, I baked a birthday cake and when the lesson was over, I lit the candles and we sang “Happy Birthday” to the church.

I thought I did a pretty good job until one of the parents called me. Her son, Lionel, was in my class. She called me and asked, “What happened in Sunday School this week?” I said, “What do you mean? I taught the children about Pentecost.” Oh, that explains it she said, Pentecost does sound like Santa Claus. She laughed. Lionel was pretty upset. He said Santa Claus was going to come to church on his birthday and light every ones' heads on fire.

I failed in my effort to help the kids understand what Pentecost is. I think I failed because Pentecost is **not** something you can make into a short, simple, concrete lesson. Sometimes I think the church, at least the Lutheran church, that I am a part of, fails when we teach about Pentecost. We don't talk about the Holy Spirit much the rest of the year. We talk about Jesus all the time and we talk about God the creator but, somehow, we just don't know what to do with the Holy Spirit. It isn't something you can make into a simple lesson. It isn't something you can contain and put in a box and take out during just one part of the church year.

We get it out at Pentecost, and we call it the birthday of the church. There are so many problems with this. One problem is that church birthdays are kind of boring. Have you ever been to a church anniversary party? Someone talks about the founding of the church. Someone else talks

about the milestones in the church's history. All the old pastors of the church that are still alive come and speak. It's especially bad if you are new to the church—there are usually lots of inside jokes about things that you were not there for and people that you never got to meet. It is too much about the past. To say that Pentecost is the birthday of the church makes it about the past. It takes away the power and the urgency that is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not some simple thing you can take out once a year. Pentecost celebrates the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is like that loud rushing wind. It's like fire. It's beautiful and all-consuming and unpredictable. The Holy Spirit is crazy and powerful--beyond our understanding and worthy of our worship.

The story of Pentecost in Acts is important to all of us. The Holy Spirit came to all the believers--not just the 12. And not just the men. It fell on the whole gathering. We read in the first chapter of Acts that when they arrived and they went upstairs, the 12 were there along with a group of women and Mary the mother of Jesus and Jesus' brothers. People were given the power to understand each other even though they were from different cultures. This was amazing and important then and it is amazing and important now.

The Holy Spirit refuses to be confined to one church, to one type of people or one country. Disciples everywhere are given the power to do good works in the name of Christ. We are given the power to see Christ in our neighbor—especially when our neighbor looks different than we expect.

I went to the Women's March on Washington a few years ago with my two teenage daughters. It was a great experience. We met so many different kinds of people. I want to share a story about something that happened to a friend while she was there.

This is what she wrote: After the march I took a cab to Union Station to go to the place I was staying with my friends. I had lost them in the massive crowd, so I was by myself. As I was walking in the station, a Muslim man selling shirts and flags started motioning and yelling to me. I thought he was trying to get me to buy something, so I just kept walking. He chased me down and said, "Where did you get that picture?" He was gesturing to the poster that I had been carrying in the march. "She looks like my wife," he said with pure emotion in his voice. I told him that it was protest art and that it was free to the public. I handed it to him so that he could get a better look at it. He held it so reverently in his hands and traced the letters at the bottom. "We the people," he read out loud in a way that let me know that he was not used to seeing a patriotic poster of a woman wearing a hijab, let alone a red, white and blue hijab. He told me he sells American flags. He wanted to convey to me how much he loves this country—his country. Then I told him, "You are an American. You belong here. I told him to take the poster home so he could show it to his wife. "Really?" he said with so much joy in his voice. Then he embraced me and gave me a kiss on the cheek like I was his daughter. He took the American flag scarf that was hanging around his neck and placed it around my neck as a gift for giving him my poster. That moment I shared with a Muslim man who only minutes before had been a stranger to me, affirmed why I came all the way from Iowa to Washington to march.

You see, my white, female friend was very different from that Muslim man. They were different but they shared a moment that reminded them of their common humanity. I think the Holy Spirit

places us in the path of people who are not like us. The Holy Spirit refuses to be confined to the boundaries of our expectations. The Holy Spirit reminds us that we are all children of God empowered to love and care for each other, no matter our differences.

The first congregation I worked at hosted a homeless shelter. Three or four times a year, we took a week to house people who had nowhere else to go. All different kinds of people showed up at the door. Some of the guests had fallen on hard times due to health problems. Some struggled with addiction and some had mental health issues. Some were just passing through town. The only thing they all had in common is that Jesus loves them, and they don't have homes. There was one young man who looked familiar to me, but I couldn't remember where I had seen him. I was having coffee with the guests and the volunteers and I was talking about my kids, like I do, too much. I was talking about my son, Eli, and the guest who looked familiar said, "I know Eli! I know you too—I went to a Halloween party at your house when I was twelve." He was one of my son's classmates in school. They were in Little League together. His father died of pancreatic cancer when he was 18 and now, he was homeless.

The shelter ran pretty smoothly that week. We didn't have any trouble until the last day. We had a new church secretary, she was great, but she was new at scheduling everything that went on in the building. One morning, she sent the type of text message that makes a pastor's heart sink. "Please call the church. There has been a terrible mistake." The problem was too many things had accidentally been scheduled on the same night. This church was in a central location in a small city and many community groups used the building. There were Boy Scouts, Alcoholics Anonymous, Bible studies and various support groups. We kept all the groups separate. They met on different nights or at least in different sections of the building. The church secretary felt terrible. She was in a panic. CHAT, the group that was for mentally and sometimes physically handicapped people was having a party in the fellowship hall. This meant that there would be at least 50 members of Chat and 8 volunteers in the hall. The homeless shelter **also** used the fellowship hall for intake and dinner. **And** we had Bible Study and Christmas tree undecorating the same night. I told my secretary it would be fine because I wanted her to feel better. I really thought it was going to be a disaster. I like to keep church activities organized and contained in their own spaces and finished on time.

I have to tell you the Holy Spirit was at work that night. The Holy Spirit refuses to be contained to any one space or time. The Holy Spirit refuses to stick to a schedule. It was bustling and crazy that night, but we were blessed. The homeless guests had dinner in the narthex. Chat used the fellowship hall and the kitchen. Bible study met in the confirmation room. The young homeless man who went to school with my son, helped us undecorate the Christmas trees.

When the people from the Chat group arrived, it was chaotic. Imagine 50 or so people with mental and physical challenges all arriving at once, all trying to get their coats hung up and find places to sit. They must have been told to bring money for something because many of them had dollar bills clutched in their hands. In the chaos, one of the men from Chat dropped his money. I saw the young homeless man, who went to school with Eli, go up behind him. This young man had no money. He couldn't even afford to buy himself a can of soda. He reached for the money. He didn't know I was watching. He quickly picked it up and tapped the man on the shoulder.

“Sir, you dropped this.” It warmed my heart to see someone who had no money jump so quickly to return that money to someone who had lost it.

The Holy Spirit came to the disciples at Pentecost just as Jesus promised it would. It came at Pentecost and it just keeps coming. Every single day, like a rushing wind refusing to stay put, or a tongue of fire that warms your heart.

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