

The Problem with Prophets
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Year C
The Day of Pentecost
Acts 2:1-21

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.

A lot of churches these days are wondering how they can attract young adults. They think of them as the future of the church, and they want their church to have a future. My own church was wondering about this a few years ago and some people started talking about hiring a Minister to Young Adults. “Be careful!” I said. “Before we start throwing open the door to young adults let’s make sure we’re ready to welcome them.”

Because I’ve had some experience with this.

When I went to First Baptist Church in Washington, DC, back in 2000, they already had a Minister to Young Adults. At least that was his title. The truth is that during the long interim before my arrival this young man, Sterling, had practically been the pastor of the church, providing leadership as it was needed. When I got there I asked the church what they wanted most and can you guess what they said? They said they wanted to grow. The truth is that they *needed* to grow. A church that had been bursting at the seams in the fifties and sixties was now nearly empty on Sunday mornings. So, I told Sterling that I would take over responsibilities as Pastor and he could go back to doing what he did best, reaching out to young adults in the city.

And he did. He started a Monday night Bible study with the three young adults who were in the church and within a few months the number had grown to thirty. They started coming to church on Sunday morning. They started to join. The Bible study got bigger and bigger. Sunday morning attendance nearly doubled. The older members were thrilled except for one little thing: I began to hear some murmuring around the church that these young people didn't know our history, they didn't understand our traditions, they didn't share our values. And then one Sunday a young couple walked down the aisle to join the church and I knew there was going to be trouble.

The church was in the Dupont Circle neighborhood of Washington, home to a large percentage of the city's gay population. We hadn't had a lot of visitors from the neighborhood since I'd been there (not a lot of gay people were lining up to visit Baptist churches in those days). But word must have gotten out about how friendly and welcoming we were, about how the church was growing, mostly with young adults. So this couple came to visit—two women and their infant son—and they must have gotten an exceptionally warm welcome because when I gave the invitation at the close of the service they came down the aisle and said they'd like to join the church.

I responded in the way I usually did, by introducing them to the congregation, but I didn't ask for a show of hands to let them know how happy we were that they had come. I could see that some people were not happy. After worship I pulled our deacon chairman aside and said, "We probably need to talk about this." He said, "About what?" I said, "About whether or not gay people can join our church." He didn't want to talk about it. He was a retired Marine colonel. He believed that rules were rules and we already had some rules about joining the church, written back in 1802, and they didn't

say that gay people couldn't join. So there. "I know," I said, "but I think some people may have a problem with this and I'd like for us to talk about it."

So we did. For three hours at our next deacons' meeting we talked about it, talked about whether or not gay people could join the church, and at the end of it we still hadn't decided. I thought we should talk about it some more at the next deacons' meeting but he didn't. When we sat down the next month he handed out ballots with three options: "1) Anyone who professes faith in Jesus Christ as Lord is welcome to join the church; 2) Some people are not welcome; 3) Use the space below to share your own opinion." We had 18 deacons in those days. All of them were present for that meeting. Seventeen of them chose option one. One of them wrote a three-page essay including diagrams that detailed his rather nuanced position on the subject. It took a while. But when the ballots were collected and the votes were counted the chairman announced that we would welcome anyone who professed faith in Jesus as Lord and we moved on to the next agenda item.

But there were a few weeks between that meeting and our next quarterly business meeting when we would actually vote on new members, and between those two meetings word began to get around that we would be voting on a lesbian couple that had presented themselves for membership. On the day of the meeting the church moderator pulled me aside and showed me the ballot he had prepared, with the name of every new member and two boxes beside each name: one for "yes" and one for "no." I have to give him credit. In a church that didn't like to do things they had never done before he was trying something new. But *I* didn't like it. I said, "Do you know what would happen if the *Washington Post* got hold of this ballot? If they published it in their newspaper and it

came out that we were discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation?” I said, “We’ve never voted on new members that way. We’ve always voted for the full slate. Let’s don’t start making changes now.” He seemed to see the wisdom in that, or maybe it was the threat of seeing his ballots published in the newspaper. Whatever the reason, he put them back in his briefcase and we moved on.

When it came time to vote on new members our deacon chair came to the podium and announced, somewhat awkwardly, that the deacons had met and decided that anyone who professed faith in Jesus as Lord was eligible for membership. And then the clerk came to the podium and read the names of those to be voted on and made the motion that they be approved. And then the moderator stepped up and asked if there was any discussion, which he didn’t usually do, because usually there wasn’t, but this time there was. A long-time member of the church rose to her feet and asked, “Is it true that two of these candidates for membership are homosexuals?” The moderator cleared his throat and said, “Yes, I believe that’s true.” And then this long-time member asked, “And are we going to allow unrepentant sinners to join our church?”

And that’s when it happened.

That’s when those young people who had been coming to our church and joining our church, the ones who didn’t know our history, or understand our traditions, or share our values, began to get to their feet one at a time and speak their minds. And they had plenty to say. I remember one in particular, a young law student, who made her case as if she were arguing before the Supreme Court, because she, too, had heard what we were voting on that day and that there might be some opposition. I can’t remember everything she said but I remember that she made a good speech, she spoke with passion, and in her

closing remarks she said, “If these women can’t be members here than neither can I.” And it wasn’t because she was gay; her handsome young husband was sitting right there beside her. But she was persuasive, and when she sat down somebody called for the question. When the moderator said, “All in favor?” a loud chorus of voices said “Aye!” And when he said, “All opposed?” five of our long-time members shouted, “Nay!” The motion still carried, but it may not surprise you that we never saw that lesbian couple again.

In the traditional reading for this Sunday from Acts, chapter 2, the believers are all gathered in one place when the Holy Spirit comes upon them with a sound like the rush of a mighty wind. Tongues of fire appear over their heads and they begin to speak in other languages as the Spirit gives them the ability. They pour out into the streets and cause such a commotion that some bystanders begin to suspect they are “filled with new wine.” And that’s when Peter comes to their defense. He says, “These people are not drunk, as you suppose. No, this is what the prophet Joel was talking about when he said, ‘In the last days God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy. Your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves,’ says the Lord, ‘both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.’” But here’s the problem with prophets: they may not know your history, they may not understand your traditions, they may not share your values. Your sons and daughters might stand up in church and make a motion that you would never make. And you might have to ask yourself: “Is that the Holy Spirit, or just the Spirit of the Age?”

Because there are a lot of crazy things going on in the world these days, and just because a majority of people vote for something doesn't mean that it's right. 1 John 4:1 says, "Test the spirits, to see if they are from God." But can I tell you this? The Spirit of God does some crazy things, too. In Acts, chapter 8, the Spirit sends Philip to preach to the Samaritans. The *Samaritans!* Remember when Jesus asked that Samaritan woman for a drink of water and she said, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" Because Jews and Samaritans didn't have anything to do with each other in those days. And yet here is Philip *preaching* to them, and *baptizing* them, and then asking Peter and John to come down and *pray for them to receive the Holy Spirit* and they did! Despised Samaritans!

A little later in that same chapter Philip ends up in the wilderness of Gaza where he sees an Ethiopian eunuch riding along in his chariot reading from the Book of Isaiah. Philip asks him if he understands what he's reading and he says, "How can I when there's no one to explain it to me?" So Philip gets up into the chariot and starting with that passage begins to tell him about Jesus. The eunuch asks, "Who is Jesus?" Philip tells him, and the next thing you know the man wants to get baptized, so Philip does it—in a creek right there beside the road—and an *Ethiopian eunuch* is added to the body of Christ. What do you think that woman in my church in DC would have said about that?

In chapter 10 Peter goes to the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, a Gentile. He says, "You know I'm not supposed to be here. It's against the Law of Moses for a Jew to associate with or even visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I must not call anyone profane or unclean." And so Peter begins to tell Cornelius and his household about Jesus, who was anointed "with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went around

doing good and healing those who were oppressed by the devil,” and while Peter was still speaking the Holy Spirit fell on those people and they began to speak in tongues.

Gentiles! So that Peter was forced to say, “Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

Gentiles, Samaritans, and Eunuchs, oh my! Can you imagine what the quarterly business meetings must have been like at the First Baptist Church of Jerusalem? “Test the spirits to see if they are from God,” John says, and in the Book of Acts this seems to be the test: if it sounds crazy, if it’s not something you would ordinarily do, if you or your church have never done it that way before, then it’s probably from God. And that’s why you have to be careful about welcoming young people into the church. But it’s not only young people. In his sermon on the Day of Pentecost Peter said that God was pouring out his Spirit on *all* flesh: “Yes, your young men shall see visions,” he says, “but if it’s really the Holy Spirit your old men shall dream dreams!” Dreams of a different and better world. Dreams of God’s Kingdom come.

You’ve probably heard Phillip Martin preach on this program. Phillip is the Pastor of Epiphany Lutheran Church, just a few miles away from my own church in Richmond, Virginia. He said they were having a groundbreaking ceremony recently for a multi-million dollar addition to their facility and he wanted to talk about it during the children’s sermon. When the children were gathered on the steps he unrolled the blueprints and said, “Boys and girls, this is a big day! We’re finally going to start building! There’s going to be a lot of construction going on in the next few months. There are going to be a lot of changes!” And then one of them, a six-year-old boy, said out loud, “I don’t like change!” And everybody laughed. Because it didn’t sound like

the kind of thing a six-year-old boy would say. It sounded like the kind of thing a grumpy old man would say. “But did you know,” Phillip told me, “it wasn’t the young people in my church who pushed for this addition. It was a bunch of eighty-year-olds.” Because Peter was right: when God pours out his Spirit on all flesh then your sons and daughters shall prophesy. Your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams” (no doubt your old women, too).

“Test the spirits to see if they are from God,” John says, and I might add: Before you stand up to speak at a church business meeting test the spirit that is in you. Is it from God? Is it guided by love? Does it insist on its own way, or is it willing to lay down its life for others? Is it willing to make whatever changes are necessary for the good of the world and for the sake of the Kingdom? If not, then hold your tongue, and in that moment of silence pray: “Breathe on me, breath of God, fill me with life anew, that I may love what thou dost love, and do what thou wouldst do.”

—*Jim Somerville* © 2022