

Feast of Pentecost: What it Means Today
Acts 2:1-21
June 9, 2019

Leonard Sweet wrote a book, ***The Gospel According to Starbucks***, in 2007 which I thought was right on the money. Sweet argues that people don't spend \$4 to \$5 dollars for a coffee because it is worth it or because it is superior to Tim's, they are really buying is the Starbuck's experience. Starbucks didn't reinvent coffee; they reinvented the coffee experience. People today drink deeply at the various wells of experience that the corporate world is inventing.

I remember the first time I bumped into an Apple Store. We were wandering around a Mall on a rainy day in Boca Raton Florida when I walked into this bright, futuristic looking store, with its seductive rows of Mac computers and laptops and iPods. I said to myself, "I've got to experience one of those one day." People go to Apple stores to buy the experience of the future.

Several years ago the **Globe** had an article on the developments in the **Body Shop** chain of stores. The headline read, *It's not just a store-it's an experience*. Worldwide they had introduced what they called the Pulse concept, a redesign of 2600 boutiques in more than 60 countries. This is precisely what Apple did with its Genius Bar where you go and seek expert help with your computer issues. There you can *touch, play, feel, and most importantly, stay*. So the mantra at the body shop is: *get informed, get involved, and get active*. Experience is the mantra driving many retail visions today. Is it driving the church?

Well if any biblical theme resonates with the experience manta of our modern corporate world surely Pentecost is it! But perhaps our familiarity with these important seasons in the church year robs us of their power. We lean toward the domestication of scripture's most unruly, norm-busting stories. Incarnation, resurrection, and the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit find themselves toned down into quiet images of a baby in a manger, a bunny with a basket, and a burning breeze that swept through some distant place in a distant age.

It's difficult for us today to begin to imagine what it must have been like in that room. No doubt they were praying and reflecting on all that had happened over the past month since the devastation they had felt after the crucifixion. Whatever they might have been expecting I doubt that they were not expecting this: divided tongues of fire, rapid onset of foreign language fluency, and chaos on the streets of Jerusalem looked something like a drunken party.

From cowering, fearful followers hiding away from authorities, they would become fearless, bold preachers of the new faith of Jesus. The experience of the risen Christ and the entrance of the Spirit had rocked their world. Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost are all interrelated for Luke and the young church. They, like us today, meet the crucified and resurrected God in Jesus and experience a new birth into the life of the Spirit.

The Spirit had always been around. Individuals had received his power: Saul got a turn, David got a turn, the prophets got a turn, and so on. The Spirit's life force seems contained up till now. But at Pentecost, she whooshes down and turns the room full of men and women into United Nations translators. The Holy Spirit of God is no quiet ghost. It is power, energy, and falls upon the gathered disciples like a mighty wind that whirls about in the whole room. The symbols of fire signify God's presence.

The Spirit transforms their speech, so that suddenly they can speak in the language of Mesopotamia and Palestine, Asia Minor and Egypt, Rome and Crete and Arabia. There are echoes in this story of the Tower of Babel. But instead of division, here at Pentecost Babel is reversed. Now, in place of confusion and division there is harmony and a breaking down of barriers.

Think about how radical this event was in the life of these early followers. Notice that the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost doesn't solve the problems of those gathered in that upper room; it creates them. For life for them now is going to get a whole lot more challenging.

One of the studies we held in my church was the book called the **Shack**, a novel that helped thousands of people see God as Trinity in

a new way. The main character is called Mackenzie. He finds a note in his mailbox from Papa to meet God back at the shack where his daughter had been killed. Inside he can hear voices. Consumed by fear Mack knocks and the door burst open and standing there is a large African American woman. She engulfed him in her arms. She smells like flowers. Here is a picture of God the Father full of love and humanity that can't fail to win our hearts. Then he meets a small Asian woman called Sarayu. She is the Spirit and she shimmers in the sunlight. Following her later in the novel Mack felt it was like tracking a sunbeam, light in multiple places at once. She wafted about like a playful, eddying wind and Mack never knew which way she was blowing. And there was Jesus the man full of love and grace. It's hard not to enjoy this picture of God in Trinity.

The Spirit may not be an Asian woman as she is depicted in this novel, but she sure is loving, shimmering, moving, energizing and powerful. She remains so today. The one Jesus promised comes at Pentecost to everyone who opens their hearts to God in faith. It is a picture of the world God imagined from the beginning of creation before it was ripped apart by sin. Now the Spirit comes, following the redemptive work of Jesus, to bring forgiveness, spiritual life and harmony. This is what the Pentecost promise offers the world.

It has often been easy for us in the church to domesticate the Spirit. Sometimes we cover over our spiritual bankruptcy with traditions that assure us that all is well. Yet the Spirit is free and wild and joy inducing, which may seem threatening to us within our sometimes too formal setting of church.

You have probably heard the story of the usher who is worried by unwelcome enthusiasm of a lady in the second pew who is raising her arms and praising God much too loudly for the staid reverence of the Anglican church. He quietly goes down to her and asks her to refrain from such emotional display. But she responds, "But I got religion". Well my dear you didn't get it here!

Perhaps we need to allow the Spirit freedom to guide and energize us. Truth is that we have no idea what the Spirit will do next. It is out of our control. Let's not limit her to our ways of thinking and action. What we know for sure is that the Spirit is bringing about the kingdom

of God on earth. Wouldn't it be exciting to work in harmony with the Spirit here at West Flamboro as she seeks to open hearts and bring men, women and children into a saving relationship with Jesus?

For too long we Presbyterians and those of us brought up in the various mainline churches have lived on the periphery of this vital experience of the Spirit. We pride ourselves on our commitment to the content of the faith and to our various theological and liturgical traditions. We pride ourselves on our thinking clearly on the faith. Don't get me wrong, our clarity about and commitment to the content of the faith is commendable. But it needs to be suffused by the Spirit.

When I have talked to people raised in our traditions but are no longer part of the church, they confess that they were bored with the formality of worship that seemed to have no heart. Often we came across to them as judgmental. We felt that the lively Pentecost experience was fine for those other groups, like the charismatic traditions, but it was not a healthy alternative for middle class, sensible, Protestants. We are just not that excitable, at least not by our faith. Should it surprise us then that our congregations are growing older and youth are rarely seen in worship? Surely if the experience of the Spirit of Pentecost is played down or even ignored in our church's liturgy, preaching and teaching, then Starbucks, Apple and the Body Shop provide a far more engaging model. They at least are gearing up to offer us an experience that engages us in the 21st century. Should the church not be offering the same challenge?

Pentecost: this is what it means and why it matters. Have you experienced the Spirit's life-changing, presence in your life?

Amen