

“Becoming the Church, Open to the Spirit”

Acts 2:1 – 21, Romans 8:14 - 17 & John 14:8-17, 25-27

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In the office of one of my colleagues at a previous job there hung a picture – a sketch of a couple of soldiers playing football. It looked a bit like this one.



These soldiers were in old uniforms from the world-war one era. In this picture that my colleague had, one of the soldiers was wearing a kilt, maybe that’s what caught my attention. As he saw me looking at it during a visit to his office, he told me the sketch was called: “peace breaks out.”

The picture commemorates an event from World War 1 that many people at the time refused to believe happened. There are still folks who think this event had been made up – the product of someone’s peace-loving and fanciful imagination. But it happened. There are too many photographs and 1st hand letters and accounts to deny that sometimes peace and understanding really does break out.

The picture commemorates what has come to be known as the Christmas truce. It started on Christmas Eve in 1914 in the trenches of Belgium and France. You probably learned at school that the First World War, especially the opening years between 1914 and 1916, was a horrible war of attrition fought by soldiers in miserable, muddy and cold trenches that were dug in as little as 50 yards and at most 250 yards apart. The space in between the trenches was called no man’s land and as troops tried to advance, they would go over

the top only to be mown down by the newly developed machine gun. Over the course of the war millions died in no man's land and in the trenches.

On the evening of Christmas Eve 1914, 3 months into the war as troops were facing their first Christmas away from home, British soldiers in one section of the trenches reported starting to hear carols coming from the other side. The trenches were so close that it was relatively normal to hear insults and threats from the opposing army being thrown across, but that night they heard carols instead. So, some of the British troops started to sing carols back. Eventually according to a soldier who was there in one section of the trenches a German soldier shouted, "tomorrow – we won't shoot, you don't shoot."

I can't imagine the feelings of the person who was the first one to stick his head over the parapet. I don't think I could have done it. But someone did. And no one in that section shot back. More people crawled up and eventually no-man's land was filled with a couple of hundred people from both sides, exchanging cigarettes and goodies.



A football appeared and they had a "kick about" to quote one veteran who was there. Not a game with teams, just a kick about and peace broke out in middle of misery for a just few hours.

This happened in various places down the line of trenches. Trenches were sectioned and under separate command and in a few places, some not believing what they were seeing, shot at the groups adjacent. It was a fraught and contentious action. Still, it happened. Peace broke out.

This spontaneous truce was frowned upon to say the least by those who had a war to win and as the war progressed and the technology of war got more centralized any such future action was squashed. And there were those who refused to believe then, and refuse to believe to this day, that, given the levels of animosity between the Allies and Germany that such a thing ever happened in the first place.



But there is a Spirit in use that yearns for peace and understanding. There is a Spirit in us that knows how to reach for peace and understanding. There is a Spirit that says to us - that person over there - even in all the complexities of life – that person is just like you. That person suffers and loves and wants to live well and yearns for peace just like you. There is a spirit in us that, given the opportunity, and with enough courage, will act for peace even in the most difficult of circumstances.

This is the Spirit that flowed through Jesus's ministry and this is the Spirit that was poured out with power and force on the followers of Jesus on Pentecost. What happened on Pentecost was an outburst of understanding. The followers of Jesus were able to communicate with others in unbelievable ways. They were able and compelled by the spirit to connect and understand and be understood and connect across vastly differing cultures and language and classes.

This outburst of understanding was sudden, and it left people "amazed and astonished" the text tells us. These words "amazed and astonished" in Greek convey fear and bewilderment. This was not like watching the fireworks at Disney land. This was something else. They were seeing something that should not be happening, something that upset social norms, something that raised fear and bewilderment. What they saw was the Spirit active and creating community in ways that shattered how we divide and categorize ourselves.

Now there are two responses in this text to this action of the Spirit. There is the one that for us now as we read the Holy Scripture always causes a bit of a giggle – are these men drunk? And there is this other response, "what does this mean?"

That first one, though it's a little funny to read from our vantage point now looking back at these scriptures that we revere, is actually reflective of what seems to be our default when we see the Spirit at work to upset things.

When we see folks acting to understand and create community in ways that break our norms, in ways that we think shouldn't be happening, we tend to get really uncomfortable, afraid even, and we work to shut it down. When we see attempts to develop understanding of the realities and the needs of those that we normally keep at arm's length – the stranger, and the enemy, we shut it down. This phrase – are these men drunk is flippant and dismissive. It takes away credibility and works to shut things down.

There is another response – a response that leaves room for the spirit to enable the spirit's ever-expanding work. It's that other response in the reading. What does this mean. This response asks us to prioritize curiosity and courage.

Peter tells us what the outpouring of this Spirit means. He does so by using scripture that those present would have known. It's a scripture that names a time when we will see strange things happen – a time when God will pour out God's spirit on all people. A time

when God will empower not just one called individual or even a chosen few to be God's agents but a time - an undeniably shocking time when old men, and young people, and even slaves, women as well as men, people that you would never imagine - shall know and name God's desire, God's plans and God's hope for creation.

Pentecost is that time – a time when the spirit of God is let loose. And the plan that it is about, the hope that it carries is the same hope that was in Jesus. Jesus names this in his response to Philip that we read today. You will receive another advocate, he says – another one – just like me to carry on my work. This advocate or guide will continue to accompany you in the work I have been doing. And that work beloved is to serve and sacrifice and build community that honors and cares for all people.

This is spirit that moves in you. It's that part of you that yearns for peace and understanding. That part of you that knows that that other person, that one who seems so different – so difficult - they are just like you. That person suffers and loves, they want to live well and yearn for peace just like you. There is a spirit in us that, given the opportunity, and with enough courage, will act for peace even in the most difficult of circumstances.

So, I wonder, friends, if we might give the Spirit the room it needs to do its work. When we see the Spirit at work in others reaching out, pursuing the ways of peace with those that the norms in our culture have told us are too different, when you feel the spirit move in you, prompting you to seek understanding, building community with folks that we perhaps think could never understand each other, turn away beloved from the temptation to shut these curiosity, this courage down. Reject those voices in you and in our culture that would suggest you are out of your mind and ask instead – what does this mean? Follow that question instead – what does this mean? Ask others you trust – your community here – what does this mean and see where that takes you.

It is God's promise that as we open ourselves to the workings of the Spirit in our lives - as we follow its invitation, its command based in all that Jesus taught us to reach out and to build community - curious, courageous and healing community with others, and especially with strangers and even our enemies, as we do these things we will find God's peace. Amen.