

June 5, 2022

Starting Up and Holding On

Acts 2:1-8, 22-24, 37-39

We read today the story of Pentecost. The story begins seven weeks after Jesus' resurrection from the dead. His disciples are huddled together in Jerusalem, in hiding. We read three selections from Acts chapter 2:

2 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?' 8And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?'

[But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them.] 22 'You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— 23this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. 24But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.'

37Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?' 38Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.'

And so began the Christian church. Moreover, speaking here as a veteran of at least four different Church Planting seminars, one of which lasted a full week) and who has served on a District Strategy Team with the task of setting and implementing church planting strategy, let me just say that this is the dream. This is how it's supposed to work. First, the disciples had an ideal location chosen, a large city where there were no other Christian churches. Okay, so there weren't any other Christian churches anywhere else, either, but don't quibble. The fact is, the first and most important element is choosing where to begin a church plant. Location, location, location. That's what we always spent the most time on in the DST. (District Strategy Team. Come on; stay with me here.) Second, they chose an ideal time for the launch. The launch is essential. You want to make a splash when you officially open. So they launched during a major religious festival – seven weeks after Passover, on the “Feast of Weeks,” sometimes called Pentecost. There were Jewish worshippers (or, “prospects”) there from all around the Mediterranean. The launch included a dramatic display – the sounds of rushing winds and then the miracle of languages

(Oh, man, if the DST had only had access to some of that!), and it worked exactly as the strategy suggested: later in the chapter we see that three thousand people believed.

But it gets better. You want an effective launch, sure, but if that's all you've got, you're in trouble. You want to save some of the fireworks for the next Sunday, and the one after that, to keep people coming back. And the disciples did. In the next chapter, Peter and John go to the temple and heal a lame man, right at the hour of prayer, when everyone is there to see it. Thousands more believe. We're, like, just a few weeks into the history of the church, and it's already a megachurch. Finally – a lot of church planters neglect this, but it's *so* important – they get financial commitments from their members. Acts 2 and 4 both tell how some of the early Christians sold everything they had and gave it to the church. (In fact, Acts 5 tells the story of one couple that sold a field and *said* they were giving it all to the church, but actually kept some of it back. They both dropped dead. Can you imagine the pledge drive the next year?) Like I said, this is a church planter's dream come true!

More seriously, there really is some stuff in the story of Pentecost that relates to church planting. There was a special blessing poured out on the new church that resulted in amazing numbers, both persons and offerings. And there is still a connection between “new” and numerical growth. Consultants who specialize in church growth – and there are *so* many of them – will all tell you that most of the numerical growth in the church comes from new church starts. Not every church plant succeeds, but those that do will attract more new members in a year than an established church like this one will attract in a decade. Consequently, as American Christianity faces a time of steeply declining numbers, most denominations – including the United Methodist Church – are responding by stepping up their efforts to plant more and more new churches. That's where numerical growth comes from. You locate an unserved or underserved population – a growing ethnic group or demographic in an area or a new suburb being built – and rush to plant a new church specifically targeting that group before the Lutherans do. (That was one advantage that the disciples in Acts had: no competition. I mean, sure, they got thrown in prison and sometimes executed, but they didn't have to beat the Lutherans.)

I might have overstated the rush for church planting a little bit, but I honestly don't think I did. And what I said might have made some of you a little uncomfortable. So all the emphasis is on starting big new churches? What about little ones? Or older ones like ours? Don't they matter, too? Sure, it's great to see new churches take off – both in the first century and in our time – but isn't there also a place for an older, stable church? Even if it is declining numerically? Were there no other kinds of congregations in New Testament times? Well, there were. Later in the Book of Acts, we see Paul and Barnabas (then Paul and Silas, then Paul and lots of other people) going around and starting little house churches in every town they came to. None of these had exciting launches or attracted thousands of members. When Paul wrote letters to these churches, he mentions people by name without explanation, clearly expecting everyone in the church to know everyone else. And in those letters, Paul doesn't focus on growth strategies, but on issues like “how to get along with each other” “how to not form exclusive cliques” and “how to not be jerks with new believers” and stuff like that. Does that feel a little more relatable? But there is one important similarity between the story of the Jerusalem megachurch launch in Acts 2 and the letters that Paul wrote to the struggling house churches: they both focus on the work of the Holy Spirit.

So let's go back to the story of Pentecost and this time put aside all the impressive trappings – the miracles and the noise and the thousands of converts – and look at what actually matters that day. Five hundred years before that Pentecost, in the dark days when the Empire of Babylon was destroying Jerusalem, God spoke through two different prophets to say that a new covenant was coming. We talked about this last week. To Jeremiah, God said that there would be a covenant that would not be like the covenant of the law, which God had made after the Exodus. In this new covenant God would write the law on the people's hearts, not on tablets of stone. God's spirit would bring them knowledge of God. To the prophet Ezekiel, God said that he would breathe his Spirit into the dry bones of Israel and change their heart of stone into a beating heart of flesh. That was the prophecy. Fast forward to Jesus, who told his disciples in the Gospel of John: "I'm going to leave you now, and I know you hate to hear that, but it's better this way, because after I go, God's Spirit will come to you and abide within you: encouraging you, guiding you, correcting you." What was promised to the prophets, what was inaugurated by the incarnation of Jesus Christ – that was what happened on Pentecost. God's Spirit came to dwell within us and among us, because God loves us and desires a relationship of love with us, and frankly nothing else had worked.

This is the Spirit Paul talks about all through his letters to the churches: the "indwelling Spirit." That is, the Spirit that speaks to and through every heart that listens, and that Spirit is equally present with every gathering of believers. *Every* one. Not just the big impressive, numerically successful church starts, but also the 170-year-old church in Eau Claire seeking to use its energy and largely empty building to be a witness of God's love in their context, the tiny rural churches consisting of seven octogenarians caring for each other, the hushed and secret illegal gatherings of Christians in Iran, the inner city storefront church that serves coffee to unhoused neighbors every morning, the tiny gathering of saints meeting on Thursday mornings in one small alcove of a massive, cold, empty cathedral in Dunedin New Zealand to read prayers and receive the body and blood of Christ in the Maori language, the small gathering of factory workers in the tiny government flat in the Jurong industrial district of Singapore, the morning prayer meetings in Niger where a team of translators is putting the final touches on the work of more than a decade to translate the Bible into the Manga language – and these are just a few of the places where I know that God's Spirit is present.

What is Pentecost about? It's about those gatherings, those believers. What happened on Pentecost? It wasn't just a successful launch of a new church in the year 30. What happened that day was a fundamental change in the way that God relates to humanity. God stopped speaking to us from the outside only and started speaking from within. The Holy Spirit is writing the law on our hearts, de-petrifying them and making them flesh, and as she fulfills these ancient prophecies she becomes the Comforter that Christ promised. That's what Pentecost is about. Thanks be to God.

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Final word: Funny story. You know what happened to that Jerusalem Megachurch? About 35 years after that Pentecost, Judea rebelled against Rome, and the Roman legions came down and utterly destroyed the city. The survivors of that church moved across the Jordan River to a place called Pella, where they were never heard from again. Meanwhile, those tiny little house churches that Paul and Company started, that sometimes had trouble getting along, spread throughout Europe and Asia and changed the world.

Pentecost: It's not about how we start out; it's about who is with us as we hold on. It's not about the numbers. It's about the Spirit of God.