

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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Pentecost Sunday

27 May 2007

“Playing with Fire”

Romans 8:14-17
Acts 2:1-21

Annie Dillard has written:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return. (*Teaching a Stone to Talk*, pages 58-59)

How many of you, when you hauled yourself out of bed on a Sunday morning, or sat with a cup of coffee and the Sunday paper, debating whether or not to go to church, have ever pondered those sorts of questions in the midst of your musings? Do you expect to need life preservers and crash helmets when you come here? Or what about when you pray? On your own, while you're working or walking or going about your business? Or when you go to a quiet, still corner and spend some time in private with God? What do you expect to have happen then? After Dillard likens worship to playing on the floor with chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning, she says this about prayer:

The eighteenth-century Hasidic Jews had more sense, and more belief. One Hasidic slaughterer, whose work required invoking the Lord, bade a tearful farewell to his wife and children every morning before he set out for the slaughterhouse. He felt, every morning, that he would never see any of them again. For every day, as he himself stood with his knife in his hand, the words of his prayer carried him into danger. After he called on God, God might notice and destroy him before he had time to utter the rest, “Have mercy.”

Another Hasid, a rabbi, refused to promise a friend to visit him the next day: “How can you ask me to make such a promise? This evening I must pray and recite ‘Hear, O Israel.’ When I say these words, my soul goes out to the utmost rim of life... Perhaps I shall not die this time either, but how can I now promise to do something at a time after the prayer?” (*Teaching a Stone to Talk*, page 59)

The words of his prayer carried him into danger. After he called on God, God might notice and destroy him before he had time to plead for mercy. To pray the words, Hear O Israel, meant to send his soul to the utmost rim of life, a place from which, on a daily basis, he could never be sure he would return. Is that your experience? Is that your expectation?

I have no idea what Peter and his cohorts thought or expected on that morning in Jerusalem. What they knew was that Jesus had been killed, had risen from the dead, had appeared to them a couple of times, and then told them to sit tight in Jerusalem until their marching orders arrived. They'd been doing that now for 50 days. They'd prayed. They'd selected a successor for Judas. I have no idea how much pacing and twiddling of thumbs had been going on. I have no idea what they thought they were waiting for, how long they thought they would have to wait, how much they were sitting there in that upstairs room because they were eager and expectant about receiving the gift and power that Jesus had promised, or how much they were there because they didn't know where else to be or what else to do. Were they eager to get back out there and get back to working for the Lord? Or were they in some way relieved that they had an excuse to wait and hide out and recoup. Take all the time you want, God, we're in no hurry whatsoever. In fact, if you never come back for us, that just might be okay. It's nasty out there. We've done our time, and not all that well, as I'm sure you recall. No need to rush on our account, we like it in here just fine.

All of that is just my weird and wondering conjecture. I have no idea what was going on for any of them. Yes, they were waiting; but I have no idea if it was patiently and expectantly or nervously and with a sense of dread? But I do suspect it's fair to say that they didn't see what was coming. What possibly could have prepared them for that transformation of the Jewish feast of Pentecost? By the time Pentecost rolled around, they were doing what they did every year to celebrate the harvest and give thanks to God. That doesn't mean they were prepared for the heavenly special effects that rushed in and took center stage.

When they looked back on it and tried to piece together what had happened, the first thing they could remember being aware of was a sound like the violent rush of a mighty wind, maybe like the deafening sound of a tornado spinning inside the house, tugging and tearing and ripping at everything within and around them. While they were madly trying to protect their ears from the thunderous sound, and as they dared to open their eyes, they began to see tongues of fire dancing all around the room. A raging bonfire right in the middle of the room, leaping and dancing around each of their heads, sitting on their shoulders, nibbling at their ears. When they looked back on it, it reminded them of Moses' burning bush, because once again there was fire everywhere, and yet nothing was being reduced to coals and ash. At the time, all they felt was overwhelming fear and amazement. It was when they started speaking that the crowd started swarming. Because, indeed, they were speaking in every language conceivable, even though none of the twelve knew more than one or two. Words were streaming from their mouths, and though it was centuries before the technology that allows everyone in the room to listen through a headphone to a simultaneous translation of what is being said at the podium, they did all understand. No matter who they were or where they were from, the disciples were speaking so all could understand – the words at least. It was hard to understand more than that. The crowd was dumbfounded by all of this; and while some stared in amazement and asked, what does this mean? others rushed in with their cynicism and dismissed it all by saying, don't pay them any mind – they're drunk – and at nine o'clock in the morning, if you can believe it!

At which point, Peter worked his way to the front of the crowd, found a soapbox to stand on and began to interpret it for them. No, my friends, these people are not drunk – except with God's Holy Spirit. For indeed, what the prophet Joel predicted years ago has now come true: God's

Spirit is being poured out on all people, and that means things are about to start happening, the likes of which you've never seen before. Or dreamed or imagined or conjured up with the wildest hallucinogens. God is at work here and now, and that means that the young whom we try to dismiss for being immature and uninformed, or condemn for being disrespectful and wild, will prophecy to us about the ways and will of God. And the old whom we tuck away into quiet corners and write off as out of touch or behind the times if not down right senile will in truth be imagining and dreaming about the unheard of and unprecedented possibilities that God has in store for us. Put on your crash helmets and your life preservers, secure yourself to the pews you're sitting in and hold on – because things are changing, and only God knows where we're going. Hold on, because ready or not we are heading up and moving out!

And everything did change for them, and for none of them more than Peter. He'd been a good friend, but he'd also done so much trembling in his boots that at the last minute, he'd totally failed his best friend. But now, with the arrival of the Spirit and the rod it drove up his spine, he was on fire and unstoppable. There wasn't an authority he wasn't willing to take on for the sake of Christ's gospel. There wasn't a demon he wasn't willing to put in its place, a threat he wasn't able to stare down, an outcast he wasn't eager to embrace. Tell him to never again use the name of Jesus, and he'd buy a case of t-shirts plastered with the word so he could broadcast the name to the world. Tell him to speak no more or else he'd be locked away for ever, and he'd preach like there was no tomorrow. Put him in prison, throw away the key and the Spirit would set him free.

My friends, today is Pentecost, and that is the very same Spirit that we are here inviting into our midst. Maybe you had no way of knowing that's what we'd be up to when you decided to come this morning. And I was after all the one who put the liturgy together, so you really can't be held responsible for that. But we need to be careful, because what we're doing today isn't just about dressing up in red and having a little birthday party for the Church that is nearly two thousand years old. Today, we are playing with fire – a holy fire that seeks to transform and inspire and change and lead us. To places we've never been before, or imagined or dreamed of or dared believe in. Places of justice and wholeness, of peace and possibility, of truth telling and courage living and mercy sharing and love growing.

I've been struck with some reading that I've been doing this week and how it relates to the traditional symbols of Pentecost. We think about the gift of the Holy Spirit and the sound of a wind that entered the room. We're fond of the cooling breeze that comforts us when the temperatures climb above 90. But the text says it was the sound like the rush of a violent wind – a tornado, a hurricane, a cyclone – a power to be reckoned with that had the potential for horrific destruction, as well as the promise of transformation and change.

And on Pentecost we think of fire. Was it a small warming flame that the believers could warm their hands over? Was it the refiner's fire that purges and purifies and strengthens? Or was it a raging forest fire that laps at any form of life it can reach and spreads and jumps ditches and resists containment? I've often treasured the very small pine cone I was given when we left Minnesota, a jack pine, which only releases its seeds in the searing heat of a forest fire. There are forms of transformed life that only come to be in the midst of and after that sort of heat. We

don't like it; we resist it; we run from it; but in doing so, we may also run from the very transformed life that God is offering us.

And we think about the Spirit as a dove that descended upon Jesus at his baptism. The Iona Community refers to the Spirit as a wild goose, and while I've never really found words for what that evokes in me, it's a symbol I love. Whole books have been written about geese and the model they offer the church: how they share leadership, support each other, travel by some deep instinct. And the wild part of the phrase also calls to me of that which is untamed and uncontained, exploring and stretching and probing. But this week I happened upon another bird image for the Spirit, that of a red-tailed hawk. Barbara Brown Taylor writes about the ways in which the church community has tried to think of God as a stuffed bear, comforting and soothing, or a great friend who would like to get to know us all better, if we can find the time. If we cannot, then God will love us anyway. (*Leaving Church*, page 189) She also writes about the red-tailed hawk who hunts the fields around her house. She says,

I knew that she ate the wide-eyed field mice with the white bellies whom I liked so much, along with any chick that strayed too far from its mother's shadow, but I could not hold that against her. It was the price of her wild beauty, the price I paid to watch her fly. To see her fold her wings and stoop, falling through the air like a lightning bolt on her prey... (*Leaving Church*, page 179)

For a couple of years, I've walked closely with a person who wrestles with an unprecedented set of feelings, behaviors and experiences, and together, we've struggled to understand them. Is this an addictive attempt to fill a deep seated hunger that in truth only the person and God together can fill? Or are these feelings a gift of the Holy Spirit, whose wings are carrying new life, new hope, unprecedented visions, and undiscovered possibilities? I don't know. But what I do know is that it's only in riding on the wings of that red-tailed hawk, by engaging in a prayer that takes this person to the utmost rim of life, by listening to the violent winds of the Spirit as it whirls around, will the person ever come to the place of a life transformed by the grace and power and love of God.

Worship in the presence of God is not for the faint of heart. And celebrating the gift of God's Holy Spirit at Pentecost is much more like playing with fire than lighting the candles on a birthday cake. But here we are, dressed in red, saying the prayers and singing the songs I chose for this day, so we might as well fasten on our crash helmets, crawl into our life preservers, and sit back to hear what God is going to say to us today, and where God is going to lead us in the days to come.

Happy Pentecost, my friends. Amen.