

Sermon on Acts 2:1-21

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If you have ever flown into Boston's Logan Airport, you may not know that you flew into one of the best neighborhoods in the world.

- The church I served right out of seminary is there.
- It's called East Boston, a neighborhood that is located right in the Inner Harbor of Boston.
- Eastie, as the locals call it, has long been known as Boston's Ellis Island.
- Although there is no longer an immigration station there, the community continues to be a first stop for immigrants coming to Boston from all over the planet.
- The place has a great vibe, some of the best food in the city, and gorgeous parks paid for by Logan Airport, not to mention water access and the most stunning views of downtown Boston.
- I loved living in this neighborhood.

Lest I be too enthusiastic about the place, I should also note that all the things I loved about the neighborhood were also what attracted the attention of investors and real estate developers.

- Like so many places in our world right now, East Boston was, and still is, a hotbed for new condo buildings.
- As rents rose, individuals and communities wondered how to respond.
- Some fought to stay.
- Others moved on.

In a place like East Boston, what does the church look like? And how will we know it when we see it?

- In a community that is as exciting and diverse as it is afflicted by economic injustice, how do we proclaim the message of God's restorative love?
- These were questions I asked myself every day.
- You see, I was a missionary in that community, a church planter.
- And the presence of the church was about as different as I could imagine from the seemingly homogenous Lutheran congregations I knew from my childhood in southern Minnesota.
- In Eastie, there were two mainline protestant churches, each with a small remnant congregation that kept the lights on for the sake of the massive neighborhood outreach efforts that were associated with them.
- There were also several large Roman Catholic parishes, the Italian one, the Colombian one, and the charismatic Salvadorean parish.
- Other than that, the neighborhood was brimming with spiritual innovation: storefront churches, house churches, an Islamic prayer group, a small Buddhist congregation...the list goes on and on.

- In a multicultural, economically mixed neighborhood that was constantly moving, the church's ministry had an uncertain future, but an open one. And that was exciting.

In our discernment about who God was calling us to be in that place, the story of the church in the book of Acts was a consistent source of wisdom and imagination for me and for other members of our little fledgling community.

The Acts of the Apostles, or just "Acts" for short, is often referred to as the story of the beginnings of the church.

- It's the story of how we got from a little group of people who followed Jesus around the countryside listening to him teach...to the practices and institutions we now look at and say, without question: that is the church!
- You can read stories of how things like baptism, priests and deacons, and care for the poor became central practices for the church.

As much as it is true that Acts is a story about the church, I find it helpful to think of it also as a story about the Holy Spirit.

- And when I say that, I don't mean to suggest some kind of tranquil little dove that sort of flits around and blesses what the church is doing.
- This Holy Spirit is more of the violent wind and tongues of fire variety.
- The Spirit is constantly messing up the plan and consistently reorienting the Apostles and the whole community from what they imagined the church would be.
- Particularly in the first half of the book, there is this repeated pattern:
 - After some discernment and trial and error, the early church finds itself in a comfortable place;
 - And then, without warning [CLAP/SNAP] the Holy Spirit goes outside of the community, and spreads the Gospel of Jesus to new places and new peoples.
 - The community is confronted with the challenge of pivoting and learning how to be the church in this new context.

There was a great example of this pattern a few weeks ago if you happened to be in worship: the story of Philip and the Ethiopian court official.

- Philip is minding his own business, when all of a sudden [CLAP/SNAP] God tells him to get up and go to this road in the wilderness.
- He meets the Ethiopian court official who is a eunuch, a stigmatized, sexual minority from a foreign country.
- Philip quickly learns that the Holy Spirit has arrived way ahead of him.
- The Ethiopian is reading scripture and, after just a little bit of teaching from Philip, asks what is to prevent him from being baptized.
- Philip suddenly finds himself united in the waters of baptism with someone he never imagined would be part of his community.

The following week we heard the story of Peter and Cornelius.

- Just when the church getting was a handle on what it meant to be a church composed primarily of people from all over the Jewish diaspora, [CLAP/SNAP] the Holy Spirit comes along and says “Hey, remember those Roman soldiers who conquered your homeland and set up a puppet government—it turns out that they too are capable of believing the good news of Jesus Christ and receiving the Spirit.”
- The church is composed of people who are as different as night and day in the eyes of the world.
- When the Holy Spirit comes, new relationship becomes possible.

The text we heard today from Acts 2 is where this wild and unpredictable movement of the Spirit begins.

- The Apostles are waiting in Jerusalem after Jesus has ascended into heaven.
- The events we read about today take place during the Jewish holiday called *Shavuot* (or “Weeks”).
- It’s called “Weeks” because the timing is *a week* of weeks, or a total of 49 days after Passover.
- The next day, the fiftieth day, is called *Penta-cost* and it is the traditional date within Judaism when God gave the Torah or the instruction.
- That’s why, in our story, Jerusalem is filled with Jewish people from all corners of the Roman Empire and beyond.
- Acts uses a few different phrases to describe what happened that day when the Holy Spirit showed up.
- The text describes the *sound* of a rushing wind.
- It gives us the *visual image* of tongues of fire.
- And it tells of an *experience* of spontaneous speech from the Apostles.

One interesting thing about these phrases - the sound, the visual, the experiences of the Spirit - is that even before the events of Pentecost each of them is already used to describe God’s spirit in the Jewish scriptures (what came to be called the Old Testament in Christian tradition).

- It seems clear that the earliest Christians were using the scriptures to try and understand the experience they had.
- When we look at these scriptures, we see that the texts use a wide variety of language to talk about the spirit of God including fire, water, breath, and wind.
- In the Old Testament a spirit is something that can fill you; it can clothe you; it can take hold of you and transport you; it can pour out onto you.

And yet, there’s another way of thinking about the spirit that we find in the Old Testament.

- A spirit is also something that is already inside of all of us—seemingly from birth.
- It leaves us when we die.

- And so our spirits can tremble; they can be broken; they can be delighted; and they can be emptied.

Just think about that incredible story we just heard from Ezekiel 37. It is the breath that gives life to dry, dusty bones.

- The spirit is life!
- And in that text from Ezekiel, the Spirit also restores Israel as a people, as a nation.
- Restores their identity.

So, there's a lot of background that Peter and the Apostle's may or may not have in mind when the spirit arrives in this story from Acts.

- In *that* story the Spirit gives the people gathered the ability to speak in one another's languages.
- That is, the ability to communicate and to form community across differences.
- Just as the breath of God restores the scattered people of Israel in their identity as community together in Ezekiel, so the spirit pours out over the church in Acts and gives them their unity in all the diversity of the languages and cultures that are represented in that place.

Now perhaps this feels good to us.

- Many of us want that international, multicultural vision of the church.
- One that breaks divisions.
- One that guides us in being united as one body, even as we honor and celebrate our diversity as the people of God.
- But remember those other stories that happen later in the Book of Acts that I mentioned a moment ago, of the Ethiopian court official and of the Roman Soldier Cornelius.
- When God's spirit comes to the church she certainly is inclusive and expansive and that is *radically disruptive* to what the Apostles imagined the church would be.

And that is so important for us to recognize in the church today.

- Perhaps even more for us than it was for the Apostles.
- Because unlike the Apostles, we have more than 2,000 years of wisdom and tradition in the church that both guide us in our ministry, but it also has a sneaky way keeping us from experiencing the violent wind and the tongues of fire.
- That is of recognizing where in the world the spirit is breaking down barriers and calling us into communities of love and service.
- We don't all live in places like East Boston that manage to feel both dynamic and precarious in ways that invite us to be creative in our ministry.
- But we are all called to love God and to the love the world God created.
- To love God's people in all their mystery and imperfection.
- To proclaim that love with our words and our actions into those spaces where division and

inequality reign supreme.

How might we continue to be the church, still be faithful to the amazing story of love incarnate, of Jesus who was born as one of us, died in solidarity with us, and was resurrected defeating the powers of death that seek to divide us.

- It is the nature of the church to respond to that story by looking to what the Holy Spirit is already doing on the horizon of our imagination.
- Not leaving behind who we are.
- Not forgetting the practices that have given us meaning and identity.
- But being surprised and delighted by the ever-expanding boundaries of who we think of as family, a reality that is given to us by the Holy Spirit in dreams, in visions, and in new relationships.
- May it be so in the church. In the name of Jesus. Amen.