

Day of Pentecost

ACTS 2:1-21

PSALM 104:24-34, 35b

ROMANS 8:22-27

JOHN 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

May 19, 2024

***Surprised, Amazed, and Bewildered and All at the Same Time!***

As with historic Christianity now, traditional Judaism, just like with us mainline Christian denominational types who gladly, proudly, follow in their glorious and richly hewn footsteps, a fabulously wonderful legacy indeed, Judaica is filled with a wonderful array of liturgical observances. These high and holy days were carefully, meticulously, crafted over time in ancient times marking significant events defining a proud religious heritage, ordering the religious seasonal life of a people committed to honoring these rich customs.

**In many ways it was just another average, ordinary, routine Pentecost observance, Pentecost for the longest time consisting of fifty days after Passover for Jews, now consisting of fifty days after Easter for Christians. People described by Luke as pious Jews, no doubt because of their level of commitment, had all gathered from points near and far, from every nation under heaven we are told, arriving in mass to celebrate the season also historically known as Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, a thanksgiving festival celebrating the first fruits of the wheat harvest, in other words, unlike the more reflective, much more somber, Passover observance, Pentecost was an opportunity to let your hair down a bit and enjoy the ebb and flow of a lighter and more festive holiday. As always, the big event took place in the beloved city of Zion, Jerusalem, the home of the temple and the seat of Jewish life. Oh, for a few participants, a very few, there remained some lingering anger and consternation, the events of the cross still weighing heavily on their minds, though the strangest, most far out reports of resurrection had given them hope and managed to steel their once depressed and inconsolable spirits, assuaging their once angered and tormented souls. Jesus had only recently ascended, gone from their sight, vanishing into thin air, and now they were left to ponder what their ongoing Jewish life would be like now**

**that their lives were no longer accentuated with a Jesus flair, relying on the steady touch, the comfort and security that the bodily, physical, presence of the rabbi brought to their hearts and minds.** Soon there would be the stress and strain of traditional Jews continuing to mingle, worshipping in the temple and in the synagogues with those who, as followers of the way, the way of Jesus, holding the naïve expectation that this sectarian expression peacefully would somehow coalesce and coexist, all but demanding that the Jesus movement now be normalized, becoming a significant, perhaps dominant, part of historic Judaism. As we know full well, that pipedream simply would not fly, was the equivalent of a veritable no-fly zone, anathema, for the time being the new scourge of Rome. Splits and schism became the order of the day, the eventual and inevitable, very painful, but understandable result of an inability to work within the same religious system. For now, however, at the time of this specific Pentecost gathering everyone was still happily in the same boat and the boat continued to float, no stormy seas yet on the horizon. All was calm, all was bright, a stabilizing peace seeming to carry the breeze on this first liturgical celebration since Passover, since it all went down, since the renowned rabbi was executed by Rome, crucified as a common criminal.

**The peaceful mood would not last, however, as all hell, correction, all heaven, broke loose in an instant. In what must have surely been a nanosecond, the room in which a group of the faithful had gathered, headlined by the apostle Peter, became a hectic, frenzied, frenetic, scene of technicolor splendor, to quote a popular worship resource written in the 1990s, “A Symphony of the Senses,” all kinds of crazy things happening in an instant, yes, in the blink of an eye. All the senses were touched, impacted in the most unimaginable ways, the Spirit unleashed, unbound and unbridled, a never-before-experience happening in real time in ways that defied all logic and reason. The heads of almost everyone present were spinning as was the room, the newly anointed sacred space, spinning on its axis, if not literally, at least figuratively. The Lukan writer describes the bedlam, the suddenly unrelenting pandemonium creating quite a stir, causing quite a scene, as all the hysteria unfolded. Luke tells his reader that almost, emphasis on almost, everyone present came under the spell, filled with the Holy Spirit, each one speaking in other languages but everyone knowing full well what the other was saying. Now the true number of folks was never**

revealed, as Dom Crossan would remind us as he described a different biblical context in his discussion of the Palm Sunday triumphal entry into Jerusalem, two is company, three is a crowd. **The sound and the fury must have resembled the frightening freight train sound made when a tornado does its thing, drawing a crowd like a moth to the flame as they heard the raucous rumble. Luke says in some versions that they were surprised and amazed, still other versions say astonished and perplexed, and all at the same time, the wonder of it all overwhelming their senses and their sensibilities, each one mystified at hearing their native tongue, their own language, like a gathering connected with a translator app akin to the technology used by a host of ambassadors to communicate at the United Nations. Luke tells his reader, adding, that they were not only surprised and amazed but were bewildered at all the strangeness they were beholding. What an ecstatic event for all to witness, an exhilarating moment, an exciting display. No, not everyone, because here come the party-poopers, the naysayers, the skeptics, cynics, and scoffers, those who always need to rain on somebody else's parade. Luke says, "Others jeered at them, saying, 'They are full of new wine!'" Yes, it is nowhere near five o'clock but some of these fools have gotten an early start, after all it is five o'clock somewhere! For once, thank goodness Peter was in the room, the always verbally adept, plain spoken, disciple standing ready to dispel the nonsense, to silence the critics. Yes, there was Peter, the Rock, front and center, right in the middle of the teapot tempest, now prepared to address the negative jeers being made by bystanders who were voicing their dismay and displeasure, all their uninformed criticism transparently revealing their ignorance. The apostle boldly declares that none of these grateful recipients of the Spirit's splendor have been imbibing this early, the mimosa not yet invented, and are not drunk as they are being accused and then Peter preaches a sermon for the ages using the prophet Joel as his text for the day. The former fisherman had learned well the Bible from Temple, Torah, and from the rabbi himself, and he knew how to use it.**

**The story of Pentecost reveals an underlying story about change because the winds of change were blowing, coming in a fury, rapidly approaching in ways that would forever change the religious landscape of the Near or Middle East and eventually the whole world. Pentecost subtly nudges at our spirits, inducing a sacred response from our souls, this indescribable event serving as a spiritual**

**touchstone, a holy inflection point, offering a quiet theme that would become a raging wildfire, yes, including a fire burning within us, a torrential downpour steeped in all things transformational. Pentecost instilled the gracious gift of refreshment and renewal, restoration and reformation, yet consisting of a mix of both the bane and blessing that is always inherent, part and parcel, of any and every kind of metamorphosis imaginable.** Pentecost is another one of those bellwether biblical events wrapped in mystery, the transcendence that accompanies all these larger-than-life happenings recorded throughout the Bible. Yes, at its core, the description of that specific Pentecost event is by and large interpreted as mythology on steroids. Even so, if that is the case, we approach the story by playing the usual and necessary game of let's pretend to put ourselves into the story and to see what is there. Whatever Pentecost was we know it to have been a defining moment in the life of the Jesus movement, further exacerbating the inevitable separation that would occur between traditional Jews and the Jewish followers of Jesus. Pentecost is still a defining moment, definitively marking the before and after! With the Advent of the strange phenomena that occurred at an unnamed house during the Pentecost proceedings, there could not and would not be any going back, the proverbial Genie out of the bottle for good. From the moment Pentecost was experienced in this new and radical way the evolution of the Church would accelerate, moving at breakneck speed, a new expression of an old faith emerging in ways that the larger system could not withstand or sustain, the Church soon to become a new religion all its own, a faith perspective called Christianity, the word Christian first uttered at a summit of leadership at Antioch described by the Lukan writer in Acts. Happy birthday Church! Frankly, Jesus would have had none of it!

**Change is challenging! Change is often difficult! Change is fraught with pitfalls and potholes! Change is essential, necessary, essential, necessary for the survival of any system! Change is necessary for growth in all the ways that growth can happen! Yes, change can be painful! Change is exciting! Change is exhilarating! Change can be wonderfully intoxicating! Change can be trendy! Change can be sexy, except when it is not! Change can be frightening, a very scary thing, unsettling and unwelcome! Change can make any systemic institution anxious! Change is . . . As the Steve Miller Band sang in their hit song "Jet Airliner", "You got to go to hell before you get to heaven!"** Folks, the winds of change are

**blowing at First Congregational United Church of Christ, from a gentle breeze to what some might describe as a gale force wind, things are happening here, good things, great things, fabulous things, exciting things, wonderful and wondrous things, under and outside of this roof. How we engage, how we respond, how we cope, will determine attitudes and outcomes. Do we invite change or do we discourage it? This blessed gift is in our hands, and we get to decide whether we push against the tide or whether we roll with it, and it is so hard to use that Alabama imagery as a member of Georgia Bulldog nation, whether we choose to go with the flow as new perspectives, new realities, new opportunities, unfold before us. Change—everybody likes it, but not everybody wants it! And it is the change agents down through history who have often paid the price, an immense price, for exacting change. And folks, let me be clear, as your pastor, as has been my lot in life throughout my career, I want to be known as a change agent, among other things.**

While the narratives about the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth, yes, the birthday, of the Church are the star literary attractions, this narrative describing this pentecostal awakening provides a sidebar in the story, a glimpse, a window into the challenging dynamics associated with change. The trajectory of change is never straight forward, moving in a straight line, steady as it goes, devoid of waffling and wavering, but always reflects a circuitous route, often taking participants in circles, yes, wandering as if in a wilderness, a very real exile, always an anxiety producing, fear inducing, part of the ongoing process. Not everyone is able to get on board while some choose to jump ship, to leap from the speeding train, exit stage whatever. At Pentecost, a wonderful thing happened in the midst of the routine, the ordinary, just another day in paradox, obviously an event, a radical occurrence, for the ages. For argument's sake, let us admit, acknowledge that this very weird occurrence at Pentecost was probably an isolated event, unique, a one off, a one of one. Most of the assembled mass, whatever its size, jumped at the chance to experience what was surely born of God, born from above, not a born-again moment, not a revival, but something fresh and new, never having been experienced, an experiential reality unlike anything ever witnessed, but a presence that would surely last, creating a new future for the faithful. It would have been great if everyone's spirit caught the spirit of the Spirit

and enthusiastically jumped on board at the chance to catch the feeling and the fever, just a hint of glory divine, but that was obviously not the case.

**For some in the crowd, this manifestation, this rattling wind with tongues of fire was just one step too, perhaps too many steps, too far as if those who were blinded by the sights and sounds were dancing with the devil, playing with the occult, grabbing on to a pagan practice, possessed by an intoxicatingly addictive demonic ritual. Instead of joining the party, they became party poopers. Rather than allowing the others to live and let live in the moment, as was their choice, their privilege, they chose to criticize, to condemn, to scoff, at what they perceived to be anything but of divine origin, something born of the darkness and not of the light. Counter narratives are the residual, the byproduct of any system that is healthily functioning, part of the underbelly of the way they naturally work, yes, normal, the way they operate. They can be helpful; they can be hurtful! Give and take is the way systems play anytime, every time. These are the rules of the change game when change is in the mix. Always has been and always will be. Yes, honest, sincere, critique, born of integrity, intellectual curiosity, yes, critical thinking, is always not only helpful, but necessary. At the same time, in the same breath, outright blanket condemnation, sweeping prejudicial judgment calls, as was the case of a few in a certain room during the Pentecost observance, never moves the proverbial needle, never gets humanity where it needs to be, even wants to be, longs to be. As always, it is always about balance, a healthy psychological, emotional, mental, and yes, spiritual, equilibrium. No, it is never easy.**

For those who fully, wholeheartedly, engaged and embraced this new encounter, a new day dawned for them, a new horizon, that was even better than what the prophet of old predicted, a hope fulfilled beyond their wildest dreams, beyond anything they could have anticipated or imagined. For those who were appalled at the proceedings, this was merely another example, even more proof for the disbelieving doubters and the numerous naysayers, that Jesus had finally been exposed as the false prophet they knew him to be, one whose preaching and teaching, whose his mission and ministry, should have been shunned and called out as apostate, heresy on steroids, an insult to the virtues of traditional Judaism. **Opinions are always subjective, always a matter of perspective. Where you sit or**

**where you stand determines what you see and what you experience, even what you feel. Status quo can be a lonely, miserable, place to be! Let those who have the eyes to see, see! Let those who have the ears to hear, hear! As John the revelator once more than suggested, “Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches,” yes, to this church, our church, God’s church here in Eagle River.**

The winds of change are blowing at First Congregational United Church of Christ! It is a beautiful and wonderful, frightening and scary, and yes, often messy, thing to behold. This gentle breeze always threatening to become a howling wind demands the utmost intentionality by each and every person who is part and parcel of this beloved faith community, yes, this family of faith, including all the inherent health and dysfunction any family system affords. Every day with every decision, as we discern the will of God here and now, we must test the spirits to be assured they are of the Spirit, our contemplation and reflection, all our musings, sensitive to one another and to God, born of a self-assured knowledge that our interpretations and understandings are born of the Holy and led by the Spirit. It is no small task, no small thing, but a daunting responsibility that must always be bathed, completely immersed, in prayer, the love and grace, peace and mercy, called for in any covenant Christian relationship. We are all in this together, by choice not by coercion. We are siblings all, brothers and sisters in the faith, tethered together by our friend, guide, and mentor Christ Jesus the rabbi, teacher extraordinaire, who leads the way and models for us the way we should live and the decisions we should make.

**I close with the profound words of the prophet Joel as conveyed by the apostle Peter, Joel’s prophetic prophecy saying exactly what I wish to convey and could not say any better myself. “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit! And they shall prophesy! And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Evidently, these surprising, amazing, bewildering things happened once upon a time on a quiet and peaceful, up until then, uneventful,**

**Pentecost day! Surely, it can and will happen again! Perhaps again and again in some mysterious manner! Perhaps these mystical, tangible, things are already coming to pass, happening right here and right now in our midst! May it be so for us all! May it be so!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and delightfully comes to us on the wings of the Spirit, today and every day! Amen and amen!**