

“Wind and Fire”
Sermon Preached by Maureen Smith
Central Presbyterian Church
May 27th, 2007
Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

Two years ago, on Pentecost Sunday, David Colby was installed as pastor here at Central, our first installed pastor in more than a decade. Some wonderful guest preachers participated in his installation service, and recently I went back and read the news release I wrote about it at the time.

The overall theme I heard in the messages was that they were calling us to be a new kind of church for the 21st century, to be a Pentecost kind of church here in the heart of downtown St. Paul. I thought today would be a good time to reflect on how we have been doing.

Pentecost is one of the three great celebration days of the Christian faith, along with Christmas and Easter, but admittedly it comes in a distant third. Especially when it falls on Memorial Day weekend, as it does this year, we don't fill our churches on Pentecost Sunday.

But when you think about it, we should. Pentecost is the birthday of the church, and where would we be without the church? The church has kept all the stories and teachings of our faith alive.

I love the Pentecost story, a story of the Holy Spirit at work in wind and fire. Pentecost was and is a Jewish holiday, a pilgrimage festival also known as the Feast of Weeks. The word Pentecost means “50th,” representing 50 days after Passover. On this Pentecost, that means it had been 50 days since Jesus was with his disciples for his last supper—a Passover meal—and almost 50 days since he was crucified and raised from the dead.

People were gathered together in one place, people from many countries who spoke many languages.

All of a sudden came a sound like a great wind, and tongues of fire rested on each person. My understanding would be that this was metaphorical fire—a poetic way of expressing the mystery of what happened—but in any case we are told that people spoke in languages they didn't ordinarily know, just the right languages that people in the crowd needed to hear. Or maybe it was a miracle of the ear. People spoke their own languages, and somehow others were able to understand.

In wonderful wildness and freedom, the Holy Spirit was at work. It all seemed so wild, in fact, that some observers said that even though it was only nine o'clock in the morning the people must be drunk.

Dr. Jin Kim, a second generation Korean American who is pastor of Church of All Nations in Brooklyn Center, was one of the speakers at David Colby's installation two years ago, and he picked up on this image. We need more of this drunkenness in the church, he said.

I can't report that I've seen Spirit-filled drunkenness at Central in the past two years, but I've seen some exciting things I think we can celebrate. Going back a little more than two years, we've brought in 60 new members, we've grown in worship attendance, we've grown in mission and vision, we've grown in diversity.

Some of our wonderful new members and their children have come to us from other countries—from Rwanda and India, from Kenya, from Guyana, twin girls born in Uganda. Ever since the miracle of wind and fire on Pentecost, the Christian faith has been spreading throughout the world, and it has been a rich blessing that people who learned their faith in other parts of the world are now worshiping with us. I'd like there to be more opportunities for them to help us to see our shared faith through different cultural lenses.

We are also wanting to reflect diversity as well as excellence in our art, and it was a thrill this spring to have the Chinese Christian painter He Qi and his gorgeous art works here at Central. Many of you heard He Qi tell his story, but it's so great that I wanted to retell one part of it here today. It's a Pentecost kind of story.

He Qi's father was a mathematics professor, and he probably would have followed that career path himself, but when he was 16 in the Cultural Revolution he was sent to the countryside to do hard physical labor. He got the idea that maybe he could get an easier job if he would paint portraits of Chairman Mao, because there were so many of them all around, and that's what he did.

In learning how to paint he started copying Raphael's Madonna. He painted Chairman Mao by day and Raphael's Madonna by night. When he came to Central and saw a copy of that Raphael painting above our fireplace in the Friendship Room, it touched his heart.

When he started painting Raphael's Madonna, he didn't even know the Christian story. The painting just spoke to him, and it was like a window to God for him. Later he became a Christian, and in his art—portraying biblical themes in a style that combines Chinese and western elements—his goal is to offer a message of peace and to show that Christianity isn't just a religion of the West.

I'm thrilled that we have some of his works now permanently at Central. Next I think we need some African art.

Tim Hart-Anderson, the pastor of Westminster Presbyterian in downtown Minneapolis, was another speaker two years ago. He noted the 20 languages named in the Biblical account of Pentecost. "By St. Paul standards that's just getting started," he said. "There are more languages than that in the St. Paul public schools." If we count the learners who come into our church for English classes offered through FIRE, I'm guessing we have 20 languages represented here at Central.

It wasn't by accident that the birthday of the church came on a day when the world's diversity was gathered in Jerusalem, Hart-Anderson said. People were speaking different languages, wearing different clothes, eating different foods. "It was a lot like St. Paul today."

If we can be a successful multicultural church here at Central, maybe we can carry some of what we learn into the wider society, because this is one of the greatest needs in our country today, how to live with differences in peaceful, respectful, even celebratory ways.

I want to quote one more speaker from David's installation service, the Rev. Bebe Baldwin, now retired. "We live in a culture of individualists, a culture of Lone Rangers," she said, and the church in its concern for community and the common good can be countercultural.

A city church must be a listening presence, she said, and she spoke of some of the groups who need to be heard—new Americans, the poor who have been mainly silent and mainly absent in middle-class churches, African Americans and others from backgrounds that are not Northern European.

Most difficult of all, she said, "We need to learn from the other great religions of the world." Instead of viewing other religions with suspicion or Christian triumphalism, or going to war with them, Christians need to listen to them and treat them with respect. As many of you know, this is one of my own strong commitments.

In early March, I went to a wonderful weekend seminar at House of Hope Presbyterian Church on the topic "Must Faiths Collide?" I was especially struck by the comments of the two Muslim speakers.

One was Hamdi al Sawaf, who participated in an interfaith gathering at the State Capitol after the attacks of September 11, attacks that he called "a terrible tragedy for our country." It was the first such gathering in the country, he said, and Minnesotans can be proud of that. A Lutheran bishop was the first speaker, then a rabbi. When Hamdi rose to speak, they both stood behind him to show their support, and he felt as if he was lifted to heaven.

"You as a Christian are not an infidel," he said at the House of Hope seminar. "You as a Jew are not an infidel. You are the people of the book. We're all working to serve people—to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless."

The other Muslim speaker was an ESL teacher from Somalia. I only got his first name, Abdi. The diversity of Minnesota has been eye-opening for the Somalis, he said, because in Somalia everyone is Muslim and everyone is black. "We're learning a lot from Minnesota," he said. "It's been very positive."

Most of the Muslims I've gotten to know are very grateful to be in this country, and those who are citizens are proud that they are Americans. When I visited the Islamic center in Fridley right after September 11, the first thing that struck me was the huge American flag they were flying. They wanted to show their solidarity with other Americans. A poll just came out this past week, showing that Muslims in the United States are happier and more assimilated than Muslims in Europe, and mostly have moderate views.

One topic that came up at the seminar was the issue of the Somali cab drivers who were refusing to give rides to people who were visibly carrying alcohol. This controversy in Minnesota has made it into the national news. I saw something about it a week ago on the Jim Lehrer News Hour. Resolving these issues isn't easy. We want to be true to our American values, and we want to be welcoming to people from other cultural backgrounds.

One of the speakers at House of Hope had testified at a hearing of the Metropolitan Airport Commission, and he told of the signs people were carrying, with messages like "Drivers must decide if they are Muslim or American."

Think about that. When I say the word “American,” what picture comes to your mind? Is an American white? Is an American Christian? Does an American speak English without an accent? Are those the only Americans?

I agree that cab drivers can’t be refusing people rides, but think about it. The message of the signs was that you can’t be both Muslim and American.

It’s interesting to compare the reaction to this case with the reaction to the Christian pharmacists who refused to dispense birth control pills or morning after pills. That actually causes more inconvenience to people, because it’s harder to go to another pharmacy, especially in towns with only one pharmacy, than it is to take the next cab in line at the airport, but the story didn’t stir nearly the furor that the story about the Muslim cab drivers did.

Something important to remember is that most Christians who are pharmacists will dispense birth control pills, and most cab drivers who are Muslim will give rides to people who are carrying alcohol. We understand that Christians don’t all think alike. It’s very, very important to understand that Muslims also are not one monolithic group.

I read an interesting explanation for why some of the Muslim cab drivers—Somali cab drivers—thought they couldn’t give rides to people carrying alcohol. Not only is Somalia a country where everyone is black and everyone is Muslim, but it is a country where nobody would carry alcohol in public. This was something new, and people were trying to figure out what to do, and some of them—not most of them, but a few—decided they needed to say no to giving rides to people who were visibly carrying alcohol.

They’re learning, and we have things we need to learn, too. In an age of pluralism, and in the spirit of Pentecost, of course we want to be true to our Christian faith. Let us open ourselves up to be led by the Holy Spirit who takes us in surprising new directions, still with the freedom of the wind. And still today we need the passion—the fire—of our Christian faith.

Let us speak and live and spread the good news of our faith, and let us make sure that the face we show the world is always a face of love.