Spirit!

Acts 2:1-21

Buckingham Church

May 23, 2021

Rochelle A. Stackhouse

What if the small group of Jesus’ followers gathered in that house in Jerusalem on Pentecost had seen themselves as a sad remnant of a once much larger group who followed Jesus? What if they decided that their task was to hold onto the memory of Jesus and only to support one another in their joys and struggles as they went forward in life? What if they decided that anyone who wanted to join them had to agree to do everything the way they did it, forever, to preserve the memory of what once was? What if they had kept the doors closed and their voices set to “inside” volume as the Spirit blew in among them, so no one else knew what was going on in there? What if they were embarrassed by the chaos the Spirit brought that day, of being thought “drunk,” instead of embracing it and wanting to share it?

Thank God that’s not what happened. Those folks who gathered in prayer did not see themselves as a sad remnant, but as seeds for a new creation. (repeat) They may have been a little afraid of this unknown gift Jesus promised, but they were more excited about the possibilities for new life. They might have been a little afraid at how other people might react, but they were more filled with love for everyone and could not imagine ***not*** sharing Jesus’ way to life abundant with anyone who would listen.

Above all else, they knew that it was not just about them.

Above all else, they knew that it was not just about them.

Think about it. The part of this story that everyone thinks is so cool is that the disciples were able to speak languages they did not know. At least 15 different languages! Those gathered probably already could speak Aramaic and Hebrew, and some may have had some words of Greek or Latin. But no one expected the fisherfolk from Galilee to speak intelligible Arabic or Parthian! Twice we hear the crowd exclaim how wonderful and amazing and perplexing it is that they can hear the good news of Jesus ***in their own languages***! The disciples did not require people to receive the good news in ***their*** language, Aramaic, or even Hebrew. The Spirit showed the believers that the message of Jesus was to be shared in such a way that people who were not like them could receive it in ways familiar to those people.

Friends, this was a radical departure from most other religious groups of that time, or any time. Usually, to become part of a religious community you have to learn their language of worship, their ways of doing things. You have to adapt to them. On Pentecost, the message was that Jesus comes to you where you are, in the language you speak, and that the Spirit is poured out on all flesh, not just an in-group. All flesh!

No wonder this faith spread like wildfire! Jesus wants me for who I am, and then calls me to use who I am to love and heal and bring peace and hope to the world. I can form a church if I am Greek, or Roman, or Egyptian or Parthian or Elamite or Arab! I can have a church in my house if I am a woman, even a widow! I can be baptized if I am a eunuch! I can be equal to everyone in the church and to God if I am a slave, or poor, or an orphan! I can tell the story of Jesus to everyone; it is not a secret to be kept by only a chosen few, but a gift to be given to the world! Truly, no matter where you are in your life and faith journey, you are welcome here, is what the Spirit said through the believers that day! And not only welcome but encouraged to receive the powerful Spirit of God that might lead you to do and be more than you can ask or imagine, like the Spirit did to a group of confused and slightly frightened people gathered in a house in Jerusalem. Good news, of great joy!

I have sometimes wondered if we don’t hear any further stories about some of those original disciples who were present at Pentecost because they couldn’t handle it and left the community. The chaos of all these new people who had not been part of their core group with Jesus and brought new ideas and needs might have become too much for them and they simply drifted away. The hard work of going to places where people did not do things the way they did, and then having to adapt to sharing the story in a way those folks could receive it was simply too much, even with the Spirit’s help, and they got tired and retreated to their selective memories of better times. You might understand how that could have happened.

# The writer Annie Dillard once famously wrote about church members, “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? It is madness to wear ladies’ straw 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.”

# She’s right. On Pentecost we nod at this power with balloons and pom poms and red scarves, but if we understand ourselves not as a sad remnant holding onto selective memories of gentle Jesus meek and mild, and instead understand that God needs us to be seeds of a new creation where we are invited to tap into the Spirit to speak in new languages for new times and different kinds of people, that it’s not all about us, then that power will be let loose. Chaos may result, but also incredible new life that we have not yet even imagined. But God has. Time to plant seeds. Amen.