

**Sneaky Spirit—Acts 2: 1-21**  
*June 5, 2022- Pentecost Sunday*

I'm grateful and honoured to be here with you today. I have known Lynda since the early nineties when she and my wife worked together in a previous career in Kitchener. We were members of Emmanuel United in Waterloo as well. Just as I was finishing my studies and preparing to head out on my settlement charge Lynda shared her sense of call to ministry and it seemed like the most natural thing in the world to me. Lynda's gifts for ministry are many, Melville United is blessed to be in ministry with her and Lynda has expressed her gratitude for the folks and ministry of Melville as well. Your ministry together is just beginning, and beginnings are wonderful—so much hope, so much anticipation and excitement.

But sometimes it takes an ending to really ground us in the presence of God. Have you experienced this? You come through a trying and difficult time in life and wonder, "How did I ever get through that?" I'm talking of the really tough events like death, illness, divorce, addiction, being fired—the kind of experiences that take something out of us, that exact a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual cost. You ask that question because in hindsight the enormity of the obstacles seem like more than one person could manage and you become aware that there was something more at work in your life than your own limited reserves of strength and energy. I bring this up to shine light on an observation about our faith story today and life in general—the presence of the Spirit in our lives is quite often a remembered event. We are hardly ever aware of the Spirit's work and presence when it is happening, it is only in looking back with the evidence of the present that we see it.

I suspect this same kind of thing is what generates our Pentecost story. Luke, the writer of Acts is, in the words of American preacher Will Willimon "struggling to bring to reality something of the truth about the church."<sup>1</sup> When Luke looks around the evidence of the Spirit is everywhere. What attracts people to this new movement aren't beliefs, it is the lives and the community of these Jesus followers. There is a depth of caring--widows and orphans, who are often left to fend for themselves and live in poverty, are being cared for. There is a radical equality before God—although men and women, Jew and gentile, slave and free live apart on the outside, in the worshipping community they are equal. There is a sharing of possessions, a sense that everyone as a member of the body of Christ has something to contribute to the community. Luke sees a complete transformation of human relationships based in love.

Perhaps the other thing Luke contemplates is how the community thrives despite the criminal execution of Jesus and the persecution of his followers. I imagine him looking back, to the beginning and trying to speak of the source of this movement, this movement whose success was out of proportion to the power and influence of its leader

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<sup>1</sup> Will Willimon, *Commentary on Acts*, New Interpretation Series, p. 29.

and followers. So, Luke writes a story of something strange, beyond imagination, miraculous even, to explain the existence of the early church<sup>2</sup>, a story of the Spirit's power to transform and re-order human relationships in the shape and direction of love.

A story that uses vivid images of wind and fire, of miracles, prophecies fulfilled, things coming loose and breaking open to tell a great and marvelous truth. The coming of God's Spirit, made known in the life of Jesus signals the beginning of something powerful and radically new in the Jewish faith and the Roman empire—a Spirit of love unleashed on the world that changes how people understand and how they relate to the Holy and to each other.

Luke was like us; our receiving of the Spirit is often a remembered event as well. It sneaks up on us, we come to see that something powerful was at work in our lives without us ever even being aware of it. It happens to my old neighbour Jerry. He is in his seventies when I meet him. Jerry is the kind of guy who loves to talk and is always happy to see you. He radiates a quiet contentment about life. It hasn't always been that way. Jerry is a recovering alcoholic going on 30 years at the time. He devotes much of his life to AA and helping recovering addicts. Jerry talks freely to me about his addiction and recovery.

He tells me there is one day in his recovery that particularly stands out for him. It is a February morning, about two years into his recovery. He goes to the window and there is a good foot of snow on the ground, so he puts on his boots and coat and shovels the drive. He comes inside, by this time his wife is up, she makes a pot of coffee and they share a mug each, have breakfast together, and Jerry drives her to work. Doesn't sound like much does it? Except that when Jerry pulls back into his driveway, in that quiet moment between the time he turns off the ignition and just before he reaches for the handle of the door a thought crosses his mind. A thought so shocking in what it reveals that he simply freezes. As the thought sinks in his frozen and rigid posture begins to come loose and break open and he cries tears of joy and gratitude. It is a simple observation that causes all this; in the quiet of the car, he observes that his day is about 2<sup>1/2</sup> hours old, and he has yet to think about how he is going to sneak a drink. In fact, it is the first time since Jerry was eleven that he hasn't woken up with his first thought being how he is going to get a drink. The joy and the gratitude that flows like rivers from his eyes has its source the humbling realization of something powerful and new transforming his life.

Here is something I see in Jerry's story that reflects what I have learned about the Spirit's presence in my life. The Spirit is always with me, but I'm not always with the Spirit. When I make small, everyday decisions that are rooted in fear, that are life-denying that demonstrate a judgmental attitude towards myself or others I close the door to the Spirit. When I make small, everyday decisions that are rooted in faith and surrender to the Spirit, when I make decisions that are life-affirming, that show compassion towards

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<sup>2</sup> Will Willimon, *Commentary on Acts*, New Interpretation Series, p. 29.

others and towards me, these decisions are more than just changes in behaviour they are an invitation for this Spirit to dwell in my life, to align my life with God's purpose.

The Pentecost story is possible because of the faith and courage of that early community of Jesus followers and their unflinching allegiance to the love they have come to know in Jesus. A love that changes everything, their relationships, their economics, their politics. For these first Jesus followers the love Jesus reveals is all that matters, all else is distraction. The fire, the wind, the speaking in previously unknown languages, this is Luke grasping at the limits of language to communicate the revelation of God in the Holy Spirit made possible by faith and courage in everyday living. The Spirit is always with us, it is revealed when we live in faith and act with courage amid the mundane, amid the messiness of everyday living.

That is the challenge to the church—to live in a such way that the ever-present Spirit of God is revealed in our communities, in Fergus, Ontario. I know this is the beginning of your ministry together with Rev. Lynda, but I want to take you to the end. How will you look back on your ministry together? Will you see an unflinching commitment to the love Jesus proclaimed? Will you see the ways in which this church cared for and protected the vulnerable? Will you see the courageous relationships you forged and the conversations you engaged in on the most pressing issues of our time? Will you see a deep fellowship with each other and a radical hospitality to the community at large? Will you see a church where everyone is committed to living the love of Jesus? Perhaps if looking back you see some or all of these things you will wonder, 'what powerful force swept through Melville United during these years?' Perhaps you will say, 'it must have been the Spirit of God come like a rushing wind and tongues of fire.' May it be so. Blessings on your ministry together. Amen.

Rev. Joe Gaspar