

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Acts 2:1-21

SERMON TITLE: Filled with New Wine

The story's told about a man who went to church for the first time. Now even though this man had never been to church before, he had heard about some of the stories from the Bible. So when he made his first appearance at a church, he expected dramatic things to happen. But after three Sundays, he was disappointed. So he went up to the pastor of the church and asked him: *When do you do it?* The pastor said, *Do what? You know, the stuff?* Well, the pastor paused for a moment with this puzzled look on his face, and then asked, *What stuff?* The man said, *The stuff in the Bible. You know, multiplying loaves and fishes, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind. That stuff.* The pastor said, *Oh, that stuff! Well, we don't do that stuff here. We believe those things and pray about those things, but we don't do those things here.* Needless to say, the man never returned to that church again.¹

Now one of the things that strikes me about this story is the high bar that the scriptures set for us. I can understand why a person familiar with the Bible might have some high expectations for the church. Take the Pentecost story, for example. As the story goes, when the Holy Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus on the day of Pentecost, extraordinary things happened—dramatic things! And the drama is intensified by the imagery: *the rush of a violent wind* from heaven—*divided tongues, as of fire*, resting upon each disciple in the house—Galileans empowered by the Spirit to speak in languages not their own.

And people noticed. The story says that *devout Jews* from all over the world who had come to Jerusalem to observe the Pentecost feast, heard this cacophony of voices speaking in different languages. So a crowd gathered at the place where the disciples were. (Imagine that, a church attracting a crowd!) And these devout Jews were bewildered; they were amazed; they

¹ Rev. Dr. C. Edward Bowen, "What's Going On Here?," The Sermon Mall. <http://www.sermonmall.com/TheMall/01/jun01/060301x.html> (accessed May 31, 1001).

were astonished! It didn't matter which country they were from or which language they spoke. The followers of Jesus were speaking of the mighty deeds of God in ways that each of these foreigners could understand. *All were amazed and perplexed.*

But as sometimes happens with devout people who are set in their religious ways, there were some in the group who could not recognize what was happening as the work of the Holy Spirit. They couldn't imagine God's Spirit doing a new thing and producing such an incredible result, so they used another frame of reference to describe what was happening. They sneered and said, *They are filled with new wine.* In other words, *they're drunk! Don't need to pay any attention to them!*

But Peter clarified things. This was not about too much wine. This was about an old prophetic word coming to fulfillment. This was about God's Spirit being poured out upon all flesh. This was about sons and daughters, men and women, and even slaves prophesying—speaking God's word to the people. This was about young and old seeing visions and dreaming dreams. This was about the Day of the Lord—a day for everyone to call upon the name of the Lord and be saved. The disciples of Jesus in this story were not filled with new wine and therefore drunk. If anything, they were filled with the new wine of the Holy Spirit—and some people only thought they were drunk!

Now the story doesn't tell us how many people walked away that day in disgust at what they thought was a public display of drunkenness, but the story does tell us in Acts 2:42 that *those who welcomed [Peter's] message were baptized, and that day about three thousand were added.*

Now do you see what I mean? With stories like this, I can understand why a person familiar with the Bible might have some high expectations for the church. In fact, stories like

this raise my expectations for the church. I want people to look at us and be amazed and astonished. I want them to be perplexed at what they experience from the church, and if people want to accuse us of being filled with new wine—thanks be to God! There are far too many churches that could never—ever—be accused of anything like public drunkenness! Drunkenness implies far more vitality than many of our churches possess. If anything, these churches are accused of being boring. It was Abraham Lincoln who once observed: *If all the people who fell asleep in church on Sunday morning were laid out end to end...they would be a great deal more comfortable.*²

But when we're completely open to the Spirit that God has already been poured out upon us, we see visions and dream dreams—and we begin to live differently. And yes, some people may think us crazy—as if we've been filled with too much new wine.

As Shane Claiborne writes: *Maybe we are a little crazy. After all, we believe in things we don't see.... We believe poverty can end even though it is all around us. We believe in peace even though we hear only rumors of war. And since we are people of expectation, we are so convinced that another is coming that we start living as if it were already here....*"We believe despite the evidence...and watch the evidence change."

Claiborne says that when we have Spirit-inspired dreams and visions like these, we're compelled to live differently. We begin living as if poverty were indeed over. We act now to beat our swords into plowshares, our spears into pruning hooks, and to learn war no more.³

² Nicky Gumbel, *Questions of Life: A Practical Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Ministry Resources, 1996), 217.

³ Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan 2006), 355-356.

My brothers and sisters, it's important that we keep seeing and keep dreaming because when we're completely open to the Spirit that God has already poured out upon us, we see visions and we dream dreams—and we begin to live differently.

Consider the vision and the dream embodied in this text. I find it compelling. The Pentecost story envisions people of different nations and languages being able to communicate with one another about the mighty deeds of God—not through the imposition of one common language or the elimination of diversity altogether—but through the gifts bestowed by the Spirit of God. This represents nothing less than a reversal of the Babel story from the Old Testament in which language becomes a mark of division. Biblical scholar Marcus Borg puts it this way: *The coming of the Spirit is...the beginning of the reunion of the human community.*⁴

And yes, according to the story, this mighty work of the Spirit begins among the Jews, but it doesn't end there. The mission is to move from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. All people are included in this vision—in this dream.

And if we're paying attention, the Spirit is still at work within the church to reunite the human community in ways that amaze and astonish. For example, Episcopal priest, Jim Callahan, tells this story from his own experience: *For over a year I had been the custodian of the ashes of a child in my parish who had died of AIDS. The father was a Frenchman who wished to have his son's ashes interred in his family cemetery in eastern France, near Dijon. I agreed to bring the ashes there and to hold the service with his family and friends.*

I stammered my way through the liturgy, and the gathered friends and family were more than courteous and gracious, though the only French I felt confident about was "jus d'orange" and "merci," neither of which I could manage to work into the service. The

⁴ "Spirit for All (May 25-31)," iucc. <http://i.ucc.org/DesktopModules/DnnForge%20-%20NewsArticles/Print.aspx?tabid=81&tabmodu...> (accessed May 30, 2009).

grandmother of the child stunned me when she thanked me for “the mess” I had made. Her daughters-in-law quickly explained that this was the French for mass.

It was a time of great healing for the parents and their devoted family and friends. Afterward, we went to a 400-year-old inn and had lunch, which turned into a French wake, with joy and camaraderie and love flowing as freely as wine. I didn’t understand a word they were saying, but I understood what was being said.⁵

So now I ask you: What are your expectations for our church? Do we do “that stuff?” What visions do we see? What dreams do we dream? How are we bearing a prophetic witness to the word of God in this place? And would anyone looking upon us in this congregation, ever accuse us of being filled with new wine?

⁵ Jim Callahan, “Windblown (Acts 2:1-11),” return to religion-online, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1963> (accessed May 30, 2009).