

PENTECOST! The coming of the Spirit. The Birthday of the Church.

The church is gathered to worship. There seems to be a diverse crowd of people gathered "in one place." That is about what the church does today – we gather for worship – and we are welcoming for the most part to a diverse crowd of people. They have shut the doors – don't want to be bothered while they worship. They welcome people, sing a hymn of two – do the things familiar to worship. Then a different thing happens to them. They receive God's spirit – descending on them – like tongues of fire. The people outside begin to wonder what is going on. They decide the gathered people are drunk. But Peter comes out and talks with the crowd. He doesn't use any illustrations, he doesn't have much of an outline to his sermon. He does quote a passage from Joel and he talks about Jesus and the coming of the Spirit of God. It is a short sermon. But the text says the crowd is "cut to the heart." 3,000 of them join the church! That is lot of folks. The church is going to need some more bulletins, more hymn books, more chairs. This day of Pentecost, the church is surprised by the Spirit of God.

The CHURCH had gathered and closed its doors to have service. The Greed word for church is ECCLESIA. That word literally means, THE CALLED OUT. To be in the church is to be called out of the world into the church. But we know that the Spirit calls us from the church into the world. We have our ideas about what it means to be the church, but often, we are surprised by the Spirit of Pentecost.

Today, I want to tell you about three people – people you know. People who I believe were all surprised by this Spirit of Pentecost.

Elaine Eberhart had taken a new job in development at the University of Alabama in Birmingham.

She had attended some other churches in Birmingham, and then, one Sunday, she found her way to Pilgrim. I knew who Elaine was. Her partner, Linda Miner had sung at my daughters wedding.

Leigh and Elaine both worked in development and Elaine was very helpful to Leigh as she began her job at Emory. Elaine liked our worship and soon became a part of Pilgrim. Linda was working in Atlanta, but she got a job in Birmingham and moved here. She liked our water fountain outside and she liked the grounds. She said she was not much on church anymore. I suppose because she and Linda had surrendered their credentials to the Bishop of the United Methodist Church. That is enough reason to be mad at the church. The first Sunday she came to worship at Pilgrim after moving here, she came down to the front of the service while we were singing the last hymn. I had no idea what she wanted, but she said she wanted to join Pilgrim. I thought – really?? This is the person who told me she really wasn't into church much. She would come every now and then, but mostly for the water fountain and the grounds. She is here in the front of the church wanting to join. Surprised!!! I was. She said, "You are not going to make me promise all that Jesus stuff are you?" I answered, "Yes, every word of it!"

So, Linda joined the church. She came most every Sunday. Then, one Sunday, we announced we needed someone to work with the children. After the service, Linda came up and volunteered for the job. Surprised? Yes, I was. She was great with the children and soon we had several children coming. At our planning retreat in the fall, we needed someone to be in charge of membership.

Linda volunteered! Surprised?? I was. Recently we hired Linda to plan and develop our Sunday school program with our children and their parents.

Today, on Pentecost Sunday, I look back on the path of Linda at Pilgrim. I think it was more than her good nature and her love of children. I believe she was surprised by the Spirit of Pentecost.

Our sign out on the road said that worship began at 10:00 O'clock. Well, we had long since changed worship to 11. We just didn't change the sign. The words were so small, we probably didn't see them anymore. Our adult Sunday school class met at 10. One Sunday, we were back in the Sunday school room, when Mary Virginia (who was a member of Mountain Brook Baptist at the time) brought Harry Nelson into class. She had found him in the narthex. He had come to worship at 10. In her own way Mary Virginia just ushered him into Sunday school class. Our class was using a book by Marcus Borg at the time. Harry listened for about 20 minutes and commented that he was reading the book himself. He did not know that any church in Birmingham would use that book for Sunday school.

Harry had driven by our church many times and had decided he would come see what Pilgrim was like. He began

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coming every Sunday. Soon he brought his wife Sharon. They joined Pilgrim. When we entered our long range planning process, Harry was elected chairperson. For about three years, that committee has met once a month or more in Harry and Sharon's home. Harry retired last spring.

I think it was so he would have more time to devote to Pilgrim!!!! He leads our church transformation project. I don't know that Harry had all this in mind when he joined Pilgrim. I believe he was surprised by the Spirit of Pentecost.

I had retired from the United Methodist church after 43 years. I went to South Africa with the Peace Corps. I come back to Birmingham, found this home that the United Methodist Church furnished retired ministers and was done with working with the church. I was clear about that. One morning at 7:30 Jane Phillips called. "Bud, we need to drink some coffee and talk about Pilgrim." About a year before this, I had done Advent and Christmas at Pilgrim as the interim minister had left. I was all of a month acquainted with Pilgrim. We talked. The way Jane put it was "We just need you to come preach awhile at Pilgrim and do some pastoral care for us - part-time." Within a year I had written all the theological papers required by the Church and Ministry Committee of the UCC, met with the powers that be and was installed as pastor of Pilgrim. I could see the need for Pilgrim - this open, inclusive, theologically liberal church here in Birmingham. I can tell you today, as I began that preaching for awhile, I had no idea where it would lead. I believe I too, was surprised by this Spirit of Pentecost.

Now we are in this transformation project. We understand that the church gathers to worship. We are in a room with the doors closed. We also understand what it means to be ECCLESIA - the called out. I believe this Spirit of Pentecost calls us into the world - to be this open, inclusive, liberal theological community of faith. I do believe the Spirit of Pentecost comes to surprise us as we are the church in our own day. That is why I am excited about the future of Pilgrim Church. I believe it is this very Spirit of Pentecost that can transform us into the People of God.