“Not Drunk…But Definitely Not Sober” Corey Nelson

Acts 2: 1-18 First Presbyterian Church

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“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning.

No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

“In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
   and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
   and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
   in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
     and they shall prophesy.

Many of you know that I grew up in a strong, devout Christian home, but one that was very different from many of yours. My family attended a Pentecostal Church and most of my family are still a part of that tradition today.

 Now if you had come to my church on a Sunday morning when I was a child, it wouldn’t look terribly different than ours. We would gather together in the sanctuary and sing hymns and some contemporary songs. We would pray and hear scripture read and the sermon preached. Things would look pretty normal.

But if you were one of those who came back on Sunday night, and a lot of us came back to church every Sunday night in those days, you would experience something quite different. Yes, there would be songs of praise and a sermon but during extended times of prayer you would hear people begin to speak in tongues, in unknown languages …some quietly to themselves, some out loud to be heard by the entire church. Sometimes someone would translate those words by proclaiming prophecy in the name of God or on behalf of God. There were times when I tried desperately to capture this gift of speaking in tongues, but it never quite took. Sometimes people would begin to have physical experiences of shaking or be “slain in the spirit” and literally pass out on the floor in front of you. It was pretty weird.

You can imagine how intimidating it was for me as a child to think about inviting a kid from school to come to church with me and seeing these bizarre, ecstatic experiences of worship.

To the outside observer, it could have appeared that those who had gathered together for worship were drunk. But given their teetotaler anti-alcohol stance, I can assure they were not drunk. But then again, they were definitely not sober. Not if by sober we are using the broader definition as those who are sensible or solemn. There was nothing very sensible or solemn about that gathering of vibrant and passionate Christians empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Eventually, I wandered into a Presbyterian college when I was 18, not knowing anything about Presbyterianism or even being able to spell Presbyterian. But I went because it had the right kind of degree programs and it wasn’t too far away from home but just far enough away. After I arrived on campus, I began to meet other Presbyterians and to attend Presbyterian churches with them and discovered over the course of those four years that it was a better fit for me in terms of theology and practices of faith. There are a number of long stories there in that journey, as you might imagine, that I will have to save for another time. But upon graduation I joined a local Presbyterian church in Seattle, Washington and have been a part of this flavor of Christianity ever since.

To be honest, there were times when I tried to reconcile my Pentecostal past with my Presbyterian present. It wasn’t until I got to seminary now almost 20 years ago that I had the opportunity to do some study and really begin to understand the roots of that Pentecostal tradition; roots that really come from two distinct moments in history:

The first is the story that we read this morning in Acts 2 about the disciples gathered in the upper room in Jerusalem. They were not there by accident, but because Jesus had commanded them before his ascension into heaven to go back to Jerusalem and to wait. It turns out they decided to do a little business during their waiting. They formed themselves a little ANC… an Apostle Nominating Committee and chose themselves a new church leader. I love the fact that they chose by rolling the dice. Wouldn’t that be fun if we could do the same? Just said, “Ted and Mike, you two come on up here, we’re going to roll the dice and see who’s in to be a deacon next year.” I’m not sure what other work the disciples did. Maybe they wrote a mission statement? Maybe they established some goals with measureable objectives? Or is it objectives with measureable goals. I can never quite remember how that goes.

So what’s surprising to me is that Jesus had told them to wait. Wait for what? After all, these disciples had three years of on the job experience—the greatest apprenticeship of all time. They saw everything that Jesus did, heard his preaching and teach, saw him feed and heal and cast out demons, they had even been the first witnesses of Christ’s death and resurrection … and despite all of that, Jesus had commanded them to wait because there was apparently another ingredient that they would need for their ministry.

Come to think of it, their personal experience of Jesus aside, the odds really were stacked against them. A handful of rural, working class, mostly uneducated disciples from a little part of the world occupied by the Roman army…did they really think they were going to spread a message of faith and hope based on the life and teachings of a man that had been hung on a cross by that same army? Please! That doesn’t sound like the outcome of an effective strategic visioning process to me. Weren’t they crazy to think that this small band of marginalized fanatics could really make a difference? …Could launch a movement that would change the entire world?

But then, as they waited, something did happen. In the midst of all this, the Holy Spirit came down and empowered them…not just with the ability to speak in tongues…but the ability to see visions and dream dreams. To believe that men and women, free and slave, young and old, of every race and tribe and tongue could be a part of this community of faith and together they could share a message of love that would help people encounter the presence of the living God so powerful as to transform lives.

Practically right out from under them—both in spite of them and because of them—the church was born! Nobody voted. No meetings were held. I don’t even think they had approved a budget yet. The Holy Spirit came down and things just got way out of control, out of *their* control. The Church was born and it was certainly not decent or in order. A violent wind, flaming tongues above their heads, unknown speeches… “Oh they must drunk.” No they weren’t drunk, but they were definitely not sober.

Over the centuries the Christian movement did indeed grow and spread around the world and it changed the course of human history. During that time, there was considerable debate about what happened on the day of Pentecost, about those extra-ordinary gifts of the Spirit. John Calvin, one of our forefathers in our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition, wrote a lot in his Institutes about the power of the Holy Spirit but he felt that some of those extra-ordinary gifts had ceased with the first disciples. And indeed, there was little evidence of that kind of Pentecostal power until 1906, 110 years ago.

At a little house church in Los Angeles, CA, they invited a guest preacher from Houston, TX to come and lead a series of revival services. His name was William J. Seymour. He was the African-American son of slaves, blind in one eye and illiterate, but full of some kind of mysterious power. In April of that year, they outgrew the little house so they rented out an abandoned Methodist church on Azusa Street in Los Angeles. In April of that year, the Holy Spirit came down and they experienced something the likes of which had not been seen in 1900 years—now called by historians, The Azusa Street Revival.

A small gathering of people…blacks, Latinos and whites, the prosperous and the poor, immigrants and natives, women and men began to experience the power of the Holy Spirit and soon hundreds and then thousands were gathering at Azusa Street in Los Angeles. A reporter of the Los Angeles Times was dispatched to find out what was going on and wrote about the “*devotees of the weird doctrine who practice the most fanatical rites, preaching the wildest theories and whipping themselves into a state of mad excitement in their peculiar zeal.*”

From their small beginnings in Los Angeles, that Pentecostal movement would indeed blaze like a holy fire across the world, arguably becoming the most significant Christian movement of the last 100 years. It is now the largest and fastest growing Christian movement sweeping across parts of Latin America and Africa and Asia and even in Europe and the United States.

To the casual observer, Seymour’s vision might have been quickly dismissed. How could this small fanatical band of marginalized people hope that their experience of Pentecostal power might transform historic mainline churches? Was it either their arrogance or ignorance to believe that this revelation of the Spirit might find its way into virtually every stream of Christian tradition and grow a few new ones alongside it? I suspect that for many observers of that 1906 revival on Azusa Street, people suspected that they were crazy or high or drunk. I don’t really know what happened in Los Angeles that Spring, but I don’t think they were drunk. They were just definitely not sober.

Well the church has changed a lot in the last 100 years. That same Holy Spirit power has continued to empower us towards mountaintop experiences and accompany us in the valleys too. It seems lately like this might be one of those valleys…sobering times for the church at large and for our church in particular.

From its heyday in the 1950’s when polls showed that well over 50% of all adults in the United States regularly attended church; those same polls today say that barely17% attribute regular attendance to their life style. In the past 20 years, 250,000 churches have closed and over 80% of individual congregations (of all denominations) have seen a decline in membership.

Let’s be honest. There’s been a little reason for discouragement here at First Church too. We started off the year with some budget cuts, salaries reduced, a couple of staff laid off and our mission budget cut back. It’s understandable that people might feel discouraged or disheartened wondering if these are signs of a diminishing future. But, when I step back and look around, I see that through the power of Spirit, God is doing amazing things here in our midst.

I saw the Holy Spirit alive here a month ago when 29 eighth graders, our confirmation students, stood on these steps and joined our community of faith. And not just with the promises and pledges that we have made for generations. They stood together and declared a statement of faith that they had written from scratch, demonstrating a spiritual maturity, a theological sophistication and a cultural awareness that blew me away. If you haven’t read that statement of faith, ask Pastor Nick to send it to you this week. It will inspire you.

I saw the power of the Holy Spirit right here in this sanctuary 10 days ago when our choir and music directors presented their spring concert. While they shared some of the most beautiful music by some of the best composers our world has ever produced, they also shared a program that helped us to be aware of, and hear about, the plight of vulnerable children around the world historically and today as together we raised awareness and over $2000 for our Syrian mission partners—partners who are helping refugees who have fled to Lebanon, so that they can start schools and educate their children.

I saw the power of the Holy Spirit last month as dozens of you, women and men, devoted countless hours to hosting our mission auction and our rummage sale so that we could raise over $200,000 to send to mission partners this year who need it more than ever. I sat around tables late at night with dozens of you as we made difficult and courageous decisions about where to invest those funds as stewards of this church. We discerned and sent out $400,000 to 40 mission partners. This is the incredible power of the Holy Spirit at work in and through us and our partners.

If you want to hear one of those stories today, you’re in luck because Brenda Johnston’s here with us in worship. In her early career Brenda was a senior executive for Disney with a sweet job at a cushy Manhattan office. She had the brightest future that one could possibly imagine until she made the mistake of going on a church mission trip to Namibia in Southern Africa. Then she made the even dumber mistake of asking God what God had intended for her and her life in the midst of that experience. God said, “Brenda, I’d really like you to stay here in Namibia and serve my children.” “What! You want me to go from working at “The Happiest Places on Earth” to one of the poorest places on earth…to give up my job here? You have to be crazy.”

I can assure you that everybody and everything else in Brenda’s life assured her that she was crazy too. Disney valued her work so much that they held her job for a year so that she could take the time off and pursue this crazy idea and then come back to them to work again. Brenda took them up on the offer and after the year was over, she said, “You know what, I think I’m going to stay. Thank you very much.” I don’t have any doubt that the people gathered around the board room table that day at Disney thought that Brenda was drunk! No, she wasn’t drunk, but then again Brenda wasn’t sober either.

“I will pour out my spirit in those last days,” Peter said. “And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy…they shall see visions, and dream dreams,” Peter announced…“for in those days I will pour out my Spirit”

Friends, today the invitation of Pentecost may or may not include speaking in tongues, but it certainly includes seeing visions and dreaming dreams and I see it happening all around us and through us. I believe that the power of the Holy Spirit is still blowing among us today, empowering us to defy the odds.

We believe that we can overcome our culture’s narcissism by choosing a vision of life in community—sharing our lives with one another. We believe that we can replace our culture’s materialism and greed with a dream of self-sacrifice and generosity. We believe that, in the face of an increasing strident political and social discourse, we can model not just tolerance, but respect, civility and love towards those with whom we disagree because he hold a higher value on the relationships we nurture.

We believe that we can create a place for worship where we can invite others in to encounter the living God that we know in Jesus Christ who offers us gifts of abundant and eternal life.

We believe that we can make a dent in world hunger.

We can educate children that the rest of the world has given up on.

We can partner with the poor, offering a hand up rather than a hand out so that they can rise up and achieve the full life of dignity and hope that God intends for all of us.

We can stand with Christian churches in neighborhoods of violence so that they might be a beacon of hope to their community...and to do all of this—all of this—with such joy, enthusiasm and passion that we begin to make a little ruckus here on the corner of Sheridan and Deerpath!

And when we do, we'll have to prepare ourselves for the world to come crashing through our doors, asking, “What is all this noise in here? Are you really so naïve as to believe that you are going to make a difference? That you can change things? And by the way, didn’t you get the memo? The institution called, “church” is dying! Please! Just who do you think you are? Are you all drunk?”

 No … no …we’re filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. We rise on the shoulders of Galilean disciples and Azusa Street converts. We stand alongside brothers and sisters in Christ from every tribe and tongue—Pentecostals and Presbyterians, Catholics and Charismatics and every point in between—breaking down the walls that divide us, uniting as one body with courage and hope, declaring with confidence, “We believe all things are possible through Christ who strengthens us.” We will go out as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ: compassionate, generous, resilient and wise. Go out into a world that doesn’t understand, often doesn’t agree and yet needs us to be Christ’s hands and feet now more than ever. We may not be drunk…but we are definitely not sober. And for that, thanks be to God. Amen.