

“Amazed and Perplexed”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Pentecost – June 3, 2012

Acts 2: 1-13

Have you ever been given a gift and you really weren't sure what it was? Tom Long describes that experience in the following way:

There you are: you're at the company Christmas party, or at a wedding shower, or at your birthday party, and someone hands you a (beautifully) wrapped package. As you pull off the ribbon and the wrapping paper, all the eyes in the circle are on you. You open the box and there it is . . .

But is it a pencil sharpener or a coffee grinder?

... a scarf or a bread napkin?

... earrings or fishing lures?

Of course, the person who gave you the gift is looking at you with eager anticipation, as if to say, "Well, do you like it?" And finally, out of courtesy, you have to say something, so you say, "Oh, how could you have known? Thank you so much. I can really use a tire pressure gauge." Only to have a wounded voice say, "Tire gauge?! That's a meat thermometer!"

There is something of the same uncertainty and perplexity, in a much deeper sense, about Pentecost. You heard the story – the leaders of the early church all gathered in one place when suddenly there was the sound of rushing wind like a tornado, then tongues of fire appeared resting on every head, and each one of them began speaking the gospel in other languages. Here on Pentecost, in dramatic fashion, something has been given to the church, a gift from God. But when we open it up, what exactly is this gift? What is it for?

Amazed and perplexed. That's how the writer of Acts describes the reaction of all who witnessed what happened on the Day of Pentecost: "All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'" (2:12). That's how we respond when someone gives us a gift we quite don't know what to do with. And that's how we often react to Pentecost in the church – amazed and perplexed – as we're not exactly sure what this day means for the church.

One meaning we will often give to Pentecost is that it is the church's birthday – the day when the Holy Spirit came and breathed life into the Body of Christ. We've marked today here in the sanctuary with red helium balloons, giving it the feel of a party and celebration. And in some ways, this day is a new beginning, for it was the day that the men and women who followed Jesus stepped out on their own through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Another meaning of Pentecost is that it gives the church energy and excitement to the relatively mundane routine of the church. Spirit, fire, speaking in tongues – Pentecost can be our reason to say out with structure and business of doing church, and in with unbridled creativity and passion. And there is definitely a passion on Pentecost for shaking things up. But you'll also notice that this story in Acts is bracketed by two very church-business items: choosing the apostle who would replace Judas, and breaking bread as the church and considering how to best feed the poor. The energy and excitement of Pentecost is embedded within the mission, worship, and education of the Body of Christ.

Finally, we might think of Pentecost as the day the church is given power. Isn't that what Jesus said in the first chapter of Acts? "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you" (1:8). This is the day that the Spirit gives us the power in the church to change the world in God's image. And yet, the world doesn't recognize this power as clout, does it? "But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine'" (2:13). Is Pentecost the church's birthday, a day for energy and excitement, a day for empowerment, or something else?

Tom Long continues: *No, when all is said and done, the gift that we get on Pentecost is not the superficial gift of energy and excitement, an injection of artificial adrenaline. And it's not the kind of power that the world thinks of as power. The gift we get on Pentecost is the one gift we most desperately need and the world needs. Strangely enough, the gift of Pentecost is the gift of something to say, a Word to speak in the brokenness and tragedy of the world that is unlike any other word. Did you notice what happened to the church when the Spirit was given? It stood up and it spoke. It moved from silence to language. It talked and the whole world heard the good news in its own languages. As the prophet Joel said, "In the latter days, I will pour out my Spirit on all of humanity. And your sons and your daughters will prophesy." Your sons and your daughters will have a Word to speak, that life is stronger than death, that hope is deeper than despair, that every tear will be dried, and that in the power of Christ's resurrection, death and pain will be no more. That Word is our gift to speak.*

When Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross was writing her famous book on death and dying, part of her research involved interviewing dying patients in the hospital, trying to find out how they felt and thought as they faced death. As she went from room to room in the hospital, she began to notice a remarkable pattern. Sometimes she would go into a dying person's room and the person would be calm, at peace, and tranquil. She also began to notice that often this was after the patient's room had been cleaned by a certain hospital orderly. One day, Dr. Ross happened to run into this orderly in the hospital corridor, and she said to her, "What are you doing with my patients?"

The orderly thought she was being reprimanded by the doctor, and she said, "I'm not doing anything with your patients."

"No, no," responded Dr. Ross. "It's a good thing. After you go into their rooms, they seem at peace. What are you doing with my patients?"

"I just talk to them," the orderly said. "You know, I've had two babies of my own die on my lap. But God never abandoned me. I tell them that. I tell them that they aren't alone, that God is with them, and that they don't have to be afraid."

There's the gift at Pentecost: a Word to speak in the brokenness and tragedy of the world, a word of good news and hope that is unlike any other word ("What's the Gift?", Tom Long, day1.org/3822-whats_the_gift).

As we celebrate the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, may we, the Body of Christ, be empowered with energy and excitement to speak a Word of hope to this world, so that God's love might endure.

Come, Spirit, come! Amen.