

“Becoming the Church”

Acts 2:1-21

Acts 10:39-48

1 [Present Me] This morning’s sermon is going to be a little different as we think about ways of becoming the Church. I know we’re all missing coming to our church home every Sunday so let’s go to the café together. [Walk to Café]

If you’re wondering what all of this is – it will be a little scientific demonstration to help us explore the scripture this morning. Let’s switch over to me from a few days ago to help us out.

2 [Past Me] Hi! This is me from the past. See, different outfit! Now, I’m gonna fill all three of these glasses with oil and water. If there’s one thing we know about oil and water, it’s that they are not friends. They don’t want to mix and they won’t stay mixed for long. You can see this water bottle has oil and water in it and no matter how much I shake it – no matter how hard I shake it or how many times – even if I give it to Lucus to shake – even if I invented a ShakeMaster 5,000 complete with robot arm, fission powered engine, and dinosaur hands [shake with T-rex gloves] – even then, if we let it come to rest, the oil and water will separate. [time lapse?] See, their molecules are shaped differently so they will always just naturally drift apart so that they can do their own thing.

3 [Present Me] Thanks, past me. You know, this is kind of weird, but it reminds of a time back when I was living in North Carolina. A lot of my friends had stuck around after college and our friend group just kept getting bigger, extended to wider and wider circles of I know a guy who knows a guy who knows a guy. Anyhow, we had so many friends that we realized that we had eight pretty close friends who all had birthdays in August. For years we each tried to throw our own parties, but every time, inevitably, we would run out of days of the weekend for everyone to have their own party just how they wanted it. People had to pick and choose who

they would celebrate and who they got to see. Not that this is the biggest most terrible problem in the world, but it meant that every year everybody was missing out on something.

4 [Past Me] I remember that. Even Further Past Me did not like that one bit. It's like with these water glasses. [adds food coloring to one glass] I can put in the food coloring – the joy and delight and love of being together and celebrating – and it just sinks to the bottom. It'll slowly dye the water red, but it just moves through the oil and stops.

5 [Present Me] Then one day, we had an idea. What if we had a party that was everybody's party? What if it wasn't Cameron's party, with a number of other people feeling passive aggressive and slighted saying, "well, today is actually my birthday so this is my party, too!"? What if instead, we threw a party that really was everybody – everyone chose one activity that sounded fun and crazy and exciting and we just jumped from thing to thing, celebrating everybody? So, we did that. We had "conglomerated birthday extravaganzas" for years. We ate fabulous meals, competitively created bizarre drinks, sang, danced, hit pinatas, had political arguments (not at the same time as hitting the pinata). We played games, and, honestly, I don't even remember what else. Every year, that party turned out to be better than every one of our individual parties because we all celebrated each other all at once.

I think the reason this made it so much more joyous is that all of us were all in – we shared our whole selves with one another. It might seem like a weird leap to make, but I think that the same thing happened on Pentecost – the church's birthday. Here, you have the disciples set apart from everyone around them. They were lost and trying to figure out where their faith would lead them, what their lives would even look like, if they would really be up to the task. And because it was a festival time, they were surrounded by an even richer variety of people from every nation: Parthians, Medes, Judeans, Asians – it's a really long list. There was so much

that separated these people from the disciples and from one another, not least of which was language, which can be an almost impossible barrier. Except the Holy Spirit came down from heaven suddenly in a mighty rush of wind, filling the whole place up.

6 [Past Me] That's right! The Holy Spirit came because God saw that the people were feeling quite naturally separated from one another. Christ saw that the teachings that he gave them [add food coloring to two glasses] were just kind of sitting there. He taught them grace and peace, wisdom and love and urged them to share it – but they just felt stuck and far apart. The things that separated them seemed too inevitable to change. But then came the Holy Spirit, our Helper, our Advocate, sent from Christ himself. [drop alka seltzer tablet in glass three]. Watch the wind of God come down and stir up the heart of these eager believers. See how it bubbles up – even taking the water of the believers into places they never thought they'd make it to, the oil of people hearing a word of love from God, perhaps for the first time. Follow that food coloring as it rises far beyond where it had settled – those teachings of grace and mercy. Look at how energetic, how powerful that light of grace and wisdom that the believers first received becomes. See how much is possible when the Holy Spirit gets involved!

7 [Present Me] On that day in Jerusalem, something new was born, something new was celebrated, and it changed them forever. Once the Spirit descended on everyone gathered there like tongues of fire, they could all speak to one another and understand one another. And there's this small detail that I think is so important here. The Bible says that the crowd was bewildered, "because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each." But that word language is more than just language. I mean, imagine you were in Israel and you were somewhere where no one spoke English so you hadn't even heard your native language for months. You would feel so relieved to hear someone speaking English even if they had an Australian accent or if they had

an accent from Liverpool like the Beatles. But this verse tells us that each one heard the others speaking in their own dialect. So, not only could they fully understand the language, but it was exactly the accent, exactly the words they got to hear only when they were at home. What a miracle of connection and chaos and beauty that day was!

The birth of the church meant big changes for the believers. Not only did the church grow in membership that day, but the apostles got their first taste of a new challenge. Becoming the church would mean getting out there, working hard, standing on the foundation of their faith. Yet, the new life of the church would not be born from their own hard work, their desire to control things, their own vision of what it needed to be.

8 [Past Me] Yeah, that bottle we shook up is still very much separated. [holds up water bottle] But this Spirit filled glass – man, look at it go! [linger on 3rd bottle]

9 [Present Me] The new life of the church was born from God’s grace, God’s intervention, and God’s miraculous help. And that day of Pentecost wasn’t the first time that God had sent the Spirit. It wasn’t the first time that miracles happened or people prophesied or communities grew in faith and service. But it was a day when God reminded us, [3rd bottle] “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.” The Spirit is moving, the Spirit is restless, the Spirit is not finished with us yet.

10 [Present Me] These days, a lot of things are different. We can’t gather like we’re used to gathering, we can’t throw the parties we want to celebrate our friends and loved ones. But that doesn’t mean that the Spirit has stopped. Later in the book of Acts, we find yet another story where Peter preaches and every single member of the crowd is touched by the Holy Spirit. The believers thought maybe the Holy Spirit wouldn’t want to get involved with those other people,

those Gentiles. It was oil and water, after all. But the message Peter preached again and again was that, “everyone who believes in Christ receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” And they were astounded to see that Spirit of joy and transformation all around them – strangers speaking in tongues and praising God with a giddy shout!

On Pentecost, we are reminded that the Spirit keeps coming back to us and, when we need it, the Spirit keeps coming back for us. Right now, we’re physically distanced, but we’re holding each other in our hearts. Right now, we’re figuring out what it means to be the Church each and every day. Right now, we’re yearning to hear that direction and see that familiar fire enter our lives again and again. We cannot be the church without the miracle of the Spirit. Praise the Lord – whether we see it or not, the Spirit comes to us each and every day. So, let us not despair and hide in our separate corners. Let us not take on the burden of feeling responsible to fix everything and make everything decent, perfect, unending. Instead, let us turn to the Spirit and let her fire become our fire – guiding and sustaining us at all times. O, Holy Spirit, come to us. Wake us to the joy of your promise whenever we forget you and keep us tuned to what is creative, beautiful, holy, and loving. Amen.