

Acts 2:1-13

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.'

Revelation 3:14-20

'And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation:

'I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

"The Damned Church"

Rev. Charles Schuster

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The preacher stood at the door like our preachers do, after the service, waiting for comments like our preachers receive. And he said to one of the members of the church, the first one to come up, he said to her, "Was my sermon too long?" If you're a preacher, never ask that question. "Was my sermon too long?" And she said, "No, it just seemed long." And he said, "I'm sorry to hear that," and she said, "Don't be, it was one of the best long speeches I ever heard, I just thought it was superfluous." And he said, "Good, I intend to have it published posthumously." And she said, "I hope you hurry, I want to read it."

Robert Holmes, a United Methodist pastor in Montana for years, likes to tell the story about the preacher, may have been Robert himself, who was talking to a group of Sunday School children, and one little girl said, "Do you know why my daddy doesn't come to

church?" and he said, "No, why doesn't your daddy come to church?" and she said, "He doesn't come to church because he doesn't like what you say." Lloyd Ogilvie, once pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, famous for having written lots of books, and chaplain of the Senate I think, was confronted after church by a woman who told him she was sick and tired of hearing him preach about Jesus Christ, and she was going to another church. Six months later, after worship in his church, she came back and confronted him again, and this time she poked him with her finger, wagging it in his face, saying, "Darn you, I've been to every Christian church in this town and they're all saying the same thing."

Finally, a little girl was taken to church for the first time and the preacher that morning told the congregation what he thought about them. I guess he had been saving up. Because he told them that their hearts were as dark as the hinges on the gates of Hell, and he railed against the people, talking about their paltry support of the church, and he was critical of the hypocrisy of their actions as compared to their pious confessions and suggested that they were sinners in the hands of an angry God, quoting Jonathan Edwards as if he thought it up first, and the little child, first time in church, hearing that, after the service told her parents, "I don't think that man should have said those bad things about Christians. There might have been some of them there."

This morning it's Pentecost, it's Luke's story, the writer Luke, as you know, wrote Acts. Chapter 2 in Acts, the birth of the church, as Luke saw it, its disciples, their leader betrayed and murdered, the trial was illegal, the sentencing was beyond the reach of the law, the crowd cheering for his death, and the decisions made by timid and incompetent officials, the execution was brutal, the tomb was sealed. He didn't deserve his fate and neither did they, and for their part, they had run, they were ashamed, and then Pentecost, a holiday. It was a time of thanksgiving, fifty days after Passover, fifty days remembering how death had passed over the people of Israel. Death had not passed over the disciples. Death had come, death had resided with them, but death was defeated because he had appeared to them in spirit and fact. So thankful they were, in the darkest time of their history, the church was born in a time when the movement could have died, when the movement probably should have died. And if we read carefully the text, we see clearly what is being said. We understand the church perhaps like we never have.

Two things to note this morning. Two things. First of all, when the church was born back then, as the church exists to now, it was awkward. When the day of Pentecost had come and they were all together in one place, there was the sound of the crowd, all of them speaking in one language, it was just awkward, and people watching wondered, "What's wrong with them? What have they been drinking? What have they been smoking? What's wrong with them? What are they on? What's wrong with the church? It just didn't seem right. They weren't acting right. And sometimes the church doesn't act right. It's awkward, but it doesn't.

I think the thing that goes wrong is, we forget why we're here, and the church somehow forgets to remind us. Tony Campolo said it, he said, "People of God, one day they're going to drop you in a hole, count on it. They're going to put you in a box and then

they're going to drop you in a hole and then they're going to throw dirt on your face, and then they're all going to go back to the church, and they're going to eat potato salad, count on it. And the only question, when it's over, will you have lived out your dreams in such a way that you will have people standing around your grave giving testimonials about how you blessed their lives.?" Here's where it gets awkward. See, any church that doesn't challenge us to think in ways we never thought, any church that doesn't cause us to question what we've done, any church that values comfort over passion, any church that entertains us without occasionally irritating us, has failed us. If we've never thought we ought to leave the church because it made us angry, we ought to leave it. If we've never considered the possibility we must fire the preacher we hear most Sundays, we ought to call the bishop now and complain. It's awkward, but it's true. The Church of the Status Quo has got to go. The church where everyone is pleased is a church where no-one is challenged.

Judy Burris tells the story (it's in *Readers Digest*, therefore it must be true), a friend of hers, an organist, was asked to play for a wedding, and unfortunately didn't know the church organ, she was unfamiliar with it, so she went in the day before the wedding to practice, and she noticed the small keyboard that slid out from between the two regular rows of keys, and she played a few notes on it. She heard nothing, and so then she played a children's song, and again, she heard nothing, and then someone came running into the sanctuary. "Who's playing "Three Blind Mice" on the church carillon? It's being sounded all over the community." Can you imagine the neighbors here, if they heard "Three Blind Mice" on our carillon? It would be awkward. Or if our choir director reduced the Brahms Requiem to "Mary Had a Little Lamb"? Or if our worship services that brought forth the gospel of gentle Jesus without a prophetic witness, that lifted up personal piety without social justice, and a pulpit that never pushed the envelope nor provoked the conscience...

That passage in Revelation is the first of a series. That section that Ray, Reverend Miller read, is about the church in Laodicea. We're not sure who wrote Revelation, but it was written about the third century. It was written at a time, and this is important, when the church existed all over the world. The church was established, and that section that was read today is only one church, Laodicea, and the writer said, "You're neither hot nor cold, you're lukewarm, and I'd frankly like to spit you out." But then there were other churches that he didn't read about. There was one, the writer said, "Every one of you may think you're alive, well, you're dead. Wake up." And there's another church, the writer said, "I know what you've done. I place before you an open door that no-one can close, and you're not very strong." And to another church that writer said, "You let someone in who calls herself a prophet, and you let her teach and mislead the people to do immoral things," and to another church, that writer said, "You don't have as much love as you used to - what's your problem?" And to another church, the writer said, "You believe in God, that's good, but you believe in the wrong God. Get it together."

Paul the Apostle, you could go through his list. He got annoyed with the church in Galatia. He wrote a letter to them and said, "You're stupid. You're idiots. What's wrong with you people?" There's much wrong with the church. So why do we stay in it? Well, I like what the coach told a men's group in the church. Burton Hillis tells the story. The

basketball coach said to those people, "Some refuse to go to church because they say they're better than a lot of the folks who do. Maybe they are. But a basketball star player can do more for the game if he's on the team." I generally don't quote Sinead O'Connor, but she said, "I just don't believe in throwing the baby out with the bathwater." (No offense to the family who just had their baby baptized.) "There are things that need to be cleaned out, within the church. But underneath all of that is a beautiful baby and a beautiful truth." Sinead O'Connor.

Church is awkward. What's wrong with us? Maybe it's like the bumper sticker I saw on Friday outside the restaurant where the Men's Bible Study meets at 6:30 in the morning this past Friday. It was on a black pickup truck. It said, "I'm not speeding, I'm qualifying." Maybe that's what we're doing here in the church, when we're apt to get some things wrong. We're working on it. We're trying to qualify for it. Not there yet, it's awkward, and sometimes we have to ask what's wrong with us, and other people will look at us and say, "What's wrong with those people?" But there is the idealism that holds us, to keep going, to remind ourselves that we tell each other. Almost got it right. But the church is the church. We aim, but we don't always hit the target. We strive and sometimes we fail. We speak in our own language, and don't always understand. It's awkward. Sometimes we have to ask, "What's wrong with us?" "What's wrong with those people?" they'll ask of us.

But you know, secondly, when the church was born, back then, and as the church exists today, we know something. It's awkward, that there are some things wrong with us, but secondly, and we never must forget this, it's also awesome, because it isn't just about us. Yesterday was my birthday. I got a card from some friends. The front of the card said, "Happy Birthday to a friend, who is kind and generous and witty and intelligent and an all-around wonderful person." And inside the card it read, "Just giving you a sneak preview of what you ought to write in my birthday card." On the day of Pentecost, on the church's birthday, let us not forget that, while the church isn't perfect, the church is of God, and it's God working in us. If we wrote the church a card, it would say, "You are kind and witty and generous and intelligent and all-around, over-all wonderful." Yeah, it's awkward. It's also awesome.

Look at what's working in the people. God is alive in us. Like the disciples. The sound of a mighty wind. Tongues of fire resting on each of them. Filled with the spirit of God. It was awesome. And the people around were amazed and astonished. If you ever want to get in touch with the idealism of the church as an awesome place, just be around the children. Wednesday, you could have seen it, had you been here when the astronaut was in our sanctuary, Dorothy Metcalf-Lindenburger. This place was packed. She made you feel like you were there on the shuttle when it lifted off, and you heard the vibrations. She made you feel like when you got to the, when she got to the international space station, she slid through into it. She made you feel it. She just brought you right into it, it was a beautiful thing. And then the questions came. "What was it like at liftoff?" "What did the food taste like?" "Has there ever been a woman do a space walk?" "Dotty, were you ever afraid?" Questions kept coming. We couldn't get the microphone to the people fast enough. And then we all of a sudden noticed, not one adult asked a question. Not one

adult asked a question. Every adult was quiet. The questions were from the children, and it was a very special, awesome place.

What is the church to children? I got worried about the time. I always miss doing the children's sermon because they are so inspirational. What is the church to children? Somebody asked one little girl, "What's it like to come into the church?" and she said, "It's like walking into the heart of God." That's awesome. Why the church? Someone asked the philosopher Ayn Rand once what she thought was wrong with the modern world, and she said, "Never before has the world been so desperately asking for answers to hard questions, and never before has the world been so fanatically committed to the idea that no answers are possible." To paraphrase the Bible, the modern attitude is, "Father, forgive us, for we know not what we do - and please, don't tell us."

Will the church be able to be what it must be? It is a place where we can come and be reminded, and not just what we do, to be reminded of that, but also to be reminded of what we're able to do, and to set ourselves up to do what must be done to make a difference. To make a difference. And will we make a difference?

Six years ago there was a young woman in our adult choir, and she said to a member of our church she was sitting beside, she said, "Why am I the only college student here?" Last week, as David said, 23 college students went to work in the inner city, out of Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco. They encountered Cecil Williams. Cecil Williams was the pastor who turned that church from the point that it almost didn't exist, to become a church of 5,500 members, and the way he did that is, he said, "This church will be in touch with its community, because the church is a place that's on the cutting edge, that hears the moans and groans of the people. The church is not that entity that hides in safety, building doctrinal walls so as to separate itself from those who don't look like others in the church, or think like others in the church. The church brings people in. The church must be leading the march. The church must become a beacon to the nation, and to the world." That's what Cecil Williams thought, and that's what he did.

It was Nelson Mandela who said, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure." What we can do is incredible, when we mobilize and work. When God gets into us. What got into those people, what gets into us? It's the Holy Spirit, it's God's spirit, and it's awesome, and it lets us know we're not perfect, but we're moving toward being better. We have not arrived, but we are not standing still. And there is much we have failed to do, but there is much that we have done. And at times we have whined to God, "Do for us. Please God, we need help. Please God, we need strength. Please God, we need happiness. Please God, heal us. Please God, deal with our enemies and set our fate with promise. Please God, find us a way out so we can climb up. Please God, give us knowledge so we can acquire wisdom. Please, comma, God."

Kathleen Norris said it. "I have learned that prayer is not asking for what we think we want, but asking to be changed in ways we can't imagine. Please, God." The church reminds us, we have the power to take the comma out. "Please, comma, God, help us.

Help us discover our help. And with the force of a mighty wind and tongues of fire and the capacity to speak in our own language, but understand each other, with the holy spirit in us, to see the church, awkward at times, but awesome. What's alive in us and all we do, and in all we know what needs to be done, our task, our reason to be, our purpose for out church, Pentecost, please, comma, God, take the comma out and live to please God. For when God's people rediscover the purpose of life is to please God, it's Happy Birthday to the church, all over again.