

“The Pentecost Problem”

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Numbers 11: 24-30; Acts 2:1-21

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One of the great scenes from Walt Disney’s film, “Fantasia,” is “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice.” In classic Disney animation, Mickey Mouse plays the young assistant to an awe-inspiring master of magical spells, and Mickey wants to become a sorcerer himself. So when the master sorcerer takes off his magical hat and goes off to bed for the night, the young apprentice slips on the hat, picks up a magic wand, and leafs through the spell book that works so well for the master.

You know what happens. Mickey the Apprentice wants the power to order a broom to clean the house and do the chores for him. That seems like a desire anyone would have. Wonder of wonders, Mickey is able to summon the broom to obey, and all seems well.

At first. Then the broom won’t stop fetching water, and you know the rest of the story. The house begins to flood, and the master sorcerer is awakened to a catastrophe in motion. With great effort and anger, he has to put everything back as it was, and Mickey is in trouble! What seemed like a dream come true has become quite a predicament and a problem for Mickey.

When we remember that first Pentecost Day so many years ago, perhaps there is a bit of remorseful reflection within us. Peter and the other disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit in a way that moves them out into the world with boldness and action. We hear of Peter, the sometimes fair weather friend, standing before a crowd decisively and preaching a sermon that announces the world will never again be the same. Several verses later in Acts chapter 2, we hear that 3,000 people responded positively to Peter’s sermon. 3,000 new people were baptized and added to the fellowship of that fledging group of new Christians. 3,000 people! Why can’t we do that today? Wouldn’t we love to see 3,000 new members stream through our doors at the end of our service today, and join with us in our work, witness, and ministry for Jesus Christ? Who wouldn’t welcome something like that?

William Willimon, a retired Methodist pastor, relates how one church tried to attract such a flock of new members. He writes,

*In my last church we needed to grow. We initiated a program of door-to-door visitation. We got back in touch with the neighborhood that we had lost.*

*Wonder of wonders, despite my dire predictions, it worked! Visitors came. People showed up!*

*Unfortunately, they were the wrong people! We had evangelized a group of people who had all sorts of family and personal problems, people who were down on their luck, at the end of their rope, in short, people who were not at all like us.*

*We were forced to admit that we wanted to grow, but not just in any direction! We wanted to grow in our direction rather than God's. (Quoted from "Pulpit Resource" magazine, April-May-June 2008, p. 27.)*

Indeed the church grows through the work of the Holy Spirit. But sometimes that growth presents a problem for the church. Do we want to welcome those people whom the Holy Spirit has invited to become part of our church? Will they do things the same way that we like things to be done? Or will they mess up everything that we have put together over the years, and do things in an unfamiliar way? Will they let the people in charge stay in charge, or will they want to step forward in leadership, too? Who let these different and new people in the doors, anyway? Yes, we said we wanted new people, but we didn't know they would have their own ideas and their own needs! We didn't know they would need extra room here at the church – it was always adequate for our needs, and if they could just squeeze into the way we have always done things, then maybe they will be welcome. We didn't know how different they would be, how some of them have languages and customs we do not understand, how some of them are gay or lesbian. We are challenged by the far flung call of the Holy Spirit.

Another pastor ponders the predicament of the Mainline American churches today. As you know, it isn't just the Presbyterian denomination that has concerns about diminishing membership. He writes,

*Why is my denomination experiencing membership decline? I know a church growth consultant who says that our decline is due to the fact that we are simply overburdened with older churches. Our great period of growth was over a century ago. We built many fine, new churches in the middle of the city, where the action was back then. But in the intervening years, the action has moved elsewhere and we are stuck with these expensive-to-maintain, old buildings in the oldest, dying part of town. We have all of these large buildings that once were centers of ministry and mission that have now become a maintenance nightmare.*

*It's sad that some of the things that make the church so valuable to us – its stability amid cultural change, its dependability and predictability – are the very characteristics that led to the demise of many of our congregations and denominations. (Also quoted from "Pulpit Resource" magazine, April-May-June 2008 issue, p. 28.)*

So how did the early church do it? How could a tight bunch of provincial Galileans welcome 3,000 strangers that hailed from every remote corner of the greater Mediterranean basin?

Well, we know the early church had struggles with who could be admitted and who could not. They weren't just sure how Gentiles were supposed to fit in this new movement of disciples of Jesus Christ. They struggled.

They weren't the first group to be put in a quandary by the work of the Holy Spirit, either. Our lesson from Numbers tells us about Moses needing to recruit more leadership while wandering through that desert wilderness. God tells him to gather 70 elders, and so he takes them off for a type of leadership retreat by themselves. The Spirit of God rests upon them, and gives them a limited ability to prophesy.

But lo and behold, two unauthorized folks also received the presence of the spirit and the ability to prophesy. What a problem! They weren't part of the team! They weren't part of the trained group that met at the feet of Moses to gain insight and wisdom! "Stop them, Moses!" said one young whippersnapper. "They haven't had the special treatment that the other leaders have had!"

But Moses, who by this time had learned that God's Spirit does not work at the beck and call of human beings, is delighted. "I wish the Spirit would dwell within every one! Just imagine the possibilities!" Moses has developed that graciousness of the Spirit, that visionary quality to see problems as gifts and opportunities.

It is amazing to me to see how so many Moms have developed such a sense. I remember a friend of mine in eastern Washington telling of a time when she was driving her three young daughters from her home on a wheat farm into their nearby small town. The snow had hit hard the night before, and there was about a 15 inch layer of new snow on the ground. Her oldest daughter had missed the school bus, and it is amazing how much a child missing a bus can throw an entire day into chaos. So, she hastily bundled the two younger daughters into some kind of impromptu snow suits, and whisked all three little girls into the car to head into town, to deliver the oldest daughter to her elementary school. Whatever remained of breakfast was left in an unkempt shambles in the kitchen as they all tumbled out the door to get into town before the school bell rang.

And wouldn't you know it? The snow plows had been out, but they couldn't manage the quick and deep snowfall that had blanketed the country roads. My friend was two or three miles from her warm farmhouse when her car bogged down and careened into a snow berm. Her car was stuck, and no amount of rocking and pushing could get it out of the snow. She didn't have a cell phone at that time, but I doubt there would have been any reception anyway in the spot where she was stuck. She also knew it could be hours before another car would pass by on that road.

There she was, literally in the middle of nowhere, with three small daughters to protect. With a wonderful calm attitude that I have always admired in this woman, she got each girl out of the car, made sure their coats were snug, had them all link hands

together, and she said to them, “Well girls, we get to have an adventure!” With that, they marched back to their home through the deep snow, singing and laughing. The girls never knew that their mother was scared, or that she was totally frustrated with the entire situation. They made it home safely, and one of the girls wanted to know when they could do that again.

Who knows what God has in store for us? Who knows how the Holy Spirit will rest upon us, then drive us out into places not of our choosing, outside of our comfort zones, outside of our own individual control? Pentecost can be a bit of a problem, unless one has the wisdom to step back, and say, “Well, this is an unexpected opportunity!” May the Holy Spirit of God give us such wisdom and courage. Amen.