



**“Filled”**  
**Scripture – Acts 2:1-21**  
**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, May 15, 2016**

Shortly after she moved to a large city Midwestern city, Patty found her way to a downtown Presbyterian Church. A friend had spoken to her about their Bible study for singles and it sounded like a possibility. Patty and most everyone else in the class had grown up in a mainline church.

One day a new person showed up for the class – Allison. When she was asked about her background, they discovered that Allison had grown up in a family that did not discuss or practice anything remotely spiritual. One of her friends had told her about this church and she was intrigued to learn what it was all about and what difference it made in their lives.

Allison attended nearly every week and was constantly curious. After a year, she decided to join the church. The day she professed her faith and was baptized, most of the Singles Bible Study crowded into the front pews.

When the pastor poured water across her hair and made the sign of the cross on her forehead, Allison’s eyes glistened with emotion. Her friends were beaming.

But after the service, Patty noticed that one of the singles looked troubled so she walked along with her. “What’s the matter?” Patty asked. On a day when the rest of us are feeling warm and happy, you look, well, less than thrilled.”

The friend said, “I’m happy for her.” And there was a long pause. Then she added, “I’m afraid what will happen now. Allison has always been such a fascinating person. She’s an artist and a dancer and she possesses a deep soul. Unlike those of us who grew up in the church, she has a way of approaching spiritual matters in a refreshingly unorthodox way. I’m afraid that now she’s a member, she’s going to become boring. Just watch. Any day now she’ll start talking Christianese.”

Patty was worried she might be right. Would Christianity by its very nature – its vocabulary, its culture, its etiquette – homogenize Allison? Would it round off her interesting edges and make her boring?<sup>1</sup>

Today’s Scripture reading reminds us that the church certainly did not begin this way. People might have thought the first followers of Jesus were foolhardy and reckless to defy the empire, but certainly not boring.

As we pick up with today’s passage, seven weeks have passed since the first Easter. Seven weeks since the women were stunned to find the stone rolled away from the entrance to Jesus’ tomb. They had dashed to the disciples to tell them what they had found, but the men were more than a little skeptical of their claims.

Later that same day it was the disciples' turn to be jolted when they experienced firsthand the risen Christ. In the days that followed, the eleven disciples, the close circle of women and a number of others who had followed Jesus, struggled to assemble the pieces of the puzzle. What would be their next step? How were they supposed to carry on now that Jesus was no longer with them?

Being faithful Jews, they continued their religious routines. They prayed, they worshiped in the synagogue and then they attended the Pentecost Festival in Jerusalem.

This annual event that had been celebrated by devout believers for centuries attracted Jews from all over the known world. And in the midst of this city, teeming with religious pilgrims, the close followers of Jesus, gathered for a meeting after breakfast.

Since the Jewish festival of Pentecost commemorates God giving Moses the Ten Commandments, they may have been wrestling with the new insights into Jewish law that Jesus had taught them. Or, because they were consumed by questions about the next chapter in their lives, they may have been debating their options. Whatever the case, something unexpected happened that changed history.

Our passage says "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."

This passage sounds so foreign to our experience that it is tempting to just leave it to the Pentecostals as a model of an ecstatic experience.

But Luke, writing 50 years later, is not recording history. It is his way of saying that the disciples received their marching orders and their mission was astonishing. The disciples spoke Aramaic and Hebrew, yet they were to take the gospel to the Parthians, the Medes, the Elamites, the residents of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Rome and on and on. Their devotion to Jesus, which filled them with the love of God, was not something to hold to themselves, but to share with the entire world.

This event described in Acts was the moment they were inspired to pick up the ministry that Jesus had begun and carry it forward. Despite their tiny numbers, despite their minority status, despite their lack of financial resources, despite their lack of education and despite having no political clout, they were entrusted with Christ's mission to the world. It makes you wonder: What was God thinking?! Couldn't God have rustled up more qualified people to handle such critical work?

But those first followers were wildly successful. Peter took the message to Rome. Paul went to Greece, Turkey and perhaps as far as Spain. Thomas took the gospel to India. They became partners with God in launching a mission that eventually spread the Christian faith around the globe – even to little Delaware!

Presbyterians talk a great deal about God and Christ, but much less about God's Spirit. Pentecost reminds us that God can disrupt routines, infuse people with passion, and cause a ruckus. God's Spirit can be energizing, but can also be controversial, because it may challenge the status quo or send us into unfamiliar territory.

When our lives are in turmoil, God's Spirit can bring us peace. It can be like a gentle breeze that warms your heart and helps you feel closer to our Creator. But, most of the time, God's Spirit prods us to become more Christ-like.

When the Spirit filled the disciples, onlookers did not say, “Oh, how marvelous, the followers of Jesus are having a spiritual experience.” Instead, people thought their behavior was so alarming that they said, “They’ve been hitting the bottle!”

If God’s Spirit blew through your life in the dramatic fashion described in today’s passage, I suspect you might garner the courage to share God’s love like those first disciples. But God’s Spirit is rarely that sensational. Most of the time, God moves in our lives in very subtle ways, and is easy to bury in the distractions and noise of our lives.

What would happen if you spent some quiet time listening for God’s whisper in your soul?

If you feel you have failed as a parent or a spouse or a friend, God’s Spirit can speak a word of divine forgiveness and bring healing to your soul.

If you constantly use your credit card to buy your way to happiness, God can lead you to what will bring you true joy.

If your calendar is too filled with trivial matters, God’s Spirit can guide you to a meaningful purpose.

If something in life is defeating you, God’s Spirit can give you the courage to face it and triumph. God’s Spirit can lead us into new territory.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, some Christians believed that the Spirit was prodding them to abolish slavery. They encountered mighty resistance. Literalists pointed to the Bible and said, “There have always been slaves. Jesus said nothing about abolishing slavery and the Apostle Paul counseled the runaway slave, Philemon, to return to his master. It’s right there in the Bible; case closed.”

“Wait just a minute,” said other Christians, “God is speaking a new word. Just as God wanted the ancient Hebrew people to be liberated from their captivity in Egypt, God wants all people to be liberated from bondage.”

When God leads us into new territory, it can be tough going. But if we are led by the Spirit, we can tackle the challenges.

Yesterday, we celebrated the life of Jim Bennett who served as a Westminster pastor for 26 years. At some point he became concerned about the emotional and spiritual needs of church members and God’s Spirit prodded him to launch a Stephen Ministry program. It has continued for 30 years, and hundreds of people have benefited from this ministry.

At another point, Jim felt a heavy burden on his heart about the many homeless and hungry people walking the streets of Wilmington. He recruited a handful of others to join him in serving a hot breakfast on Saturday mornings. The Saturday Morning Breakfast Club is still going strong after more than 25 years and has served over 200,000 meals. That’s the kind of thing that can happen when we respond to the nudging of God’s Spirit.

Could the phrase of a hymn that sticks with you be God’s voice calling you? Could that spark of enthusiasm be God’s Spirit urging you to break out of a rut and join a ministry of compassion or justice or peace? Could a verse of Scripture or the words of a friend be an echo of a voice in your soul calling you into new territory?

Open your heart to the needs around you, open your mind to new possibilities, and open your soul to the Holy Wind that seeks to blow you in a new direction.

## NOTES

1. Inspired by Debie Thomas, “Against Christianese,” *Journey with Jesus*, May 17, 2015.