

## **A Fluid Situation**

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church  
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What literally happened at that momentous Pentecost moment is less important than asking: What was Luke the storyteller trying to say in the Story and symbolism? It certainly was a defining moment for the young Jesus movement; finally, the Spirit that was promised by Jesus to guide them soon, it had arrived.<sup>1</sup> The moment they waited for, had arrived. It was a baptism of sorts for the church, but not the elegant, delicate baptisms that we mainstream Christians practice, rather this baptism at Pentecost was what I term, “a fluid situation.”

Now, by “fluid” I mean unpredictable, perhaps even dangerous, and unmanageable. Imagine such an incident during worship. One hot Sunday many years ago, I was at a celebration of ministry service, ordaining and commissioning new ministers. Someone collapsed in the congregation, unconscious.

There is a temptation at moments like this to panic – what can I do? Are they dead? There is a buzz of quiet conversation, concern, fear, and we crane our necks to see. That moment, on the hot day and a capacity congregation, could have gone very differently, as it turned out. A simple solution to a “problem” would have been to ask the organist to lead us in some hymn singing while we await paramedics.

The preacher at the time, however, had sensed Spirit moving amidst the buzz of whispers and charge in the air; they called us all to pray, to seek Spirit-filled wisdom as we held that person prayerfully – holding vigil with them. As it turned out, the first responders arrived and the person had already felt better with a glass of water.

A fluid situation – moments when there is no way to predict the outcome, no way to control it. Instead, in moments like that, when the Spirit sings, we *dance* with her.

Dance they did, those disciples in the Pentecost story. It was one Spirit, but many diverse voices. If I let the Story carry me with its powerful symbolism rather than getting lost in literal details – truthfully, this scene feels like utter chaos. Spirit like tongues of fire, different languages spoken all at the same time, disoriented onlookers concluding that these people are drunk.

Peter quotes from the apocalyptic Hebrew Scripture, the words of the prophetic Joel:

I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young shall see visions,  
and your old shall dream dreams.  
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. [Acts 1: 17, 18,  
loosely referencing Joel]

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<sup>1</sup> At the end of Luke’s Gospel, <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=488949787> (Luke 23: 48,49) Jesus tells them to “wait”, then Luke opens the Book of Acts of the Apostles with a similar message, <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=488949723> (Acts 1: 6-11)

This is a God with a universal vision of who is welcome; God unleashing power not upon the well behaved, the properly dressed, the people who know how things work. This is a Spirit gathering together a community grounded in diversity that presents unnervingly unpredictable possibilities; young and old, people of all genders and orientations, all creeds and skin colour.

We, God's children, might wish we could manage this situation we call "church". Maybe we secretly wish we could have some say in who gets onto the invitation list in this apocalyptic, God's kingdom vision. Come on, admit it, you would like to have some control over who is in your bubble – your "safety zone" in worship, when we physically worship together again.

Then, a stranger arrives half way into the worship. The stranger sits down *right beside you*. Or, right in front of you. Turns out that stranger talks; mind you they are "Amens" – ok, hard to tell a person not to say Amen. But it's annoying. Or, the person in front of you has marks on them of a tough life. The signs of substance addiction makes you feel a little awkward, perhaps even a little bit afraid of what might happen.

When the Spirit moves, you very well might experience a fluid situation. A community that doesn't just tolerate diversity doesn't pass a motion at Council meeting that we will be fully inclusive of absolutely everyone. Christ's community might instead tell this Pentecost story regularly, as our story – maybe not just once a year. A Spirit-moved community might proclaim regularly that when the Spirit moves, there ain't gonna be anyone managing it.

Here we go again, the Spirit's upon us again; this is a fluid situation. A newcomer shares with you their honest misgivings about church and Christianity, and launches into a story about not being welcomed in another church because they identify as transgender. It might have been any number of common testimonials of how a church excluded a person. Another story could be from a beleaguered single mom worshipping at a church for the first time; the person behind them whispers to them that there was a nursery downstairs; perhaps she may want to take the talkative child down there.

An instinct for me, a lifetime member of church, might be, instead of listening empathetically, we take a defensive approach:

Don't worry, we are a welcoming church.

The thing is, maybe we are more like that other church than we want to believe, and the Spirit is calling us to grow.

When we follow the Spirit's leading, there is no controlling, no managing the situation. That's what the Luke's telling of the Pentecost story in Acts says to me. Jews with their purity laws and Gentiles who cared less about holy rules; they didn't get along. But as the book of Acts continues past Pentecost, the followers of Jesus learn how to let the Spirit do its work: loving, welcoming, creating diverse, even chaotic and unpredictable, community calling the faithful time and again to deepen their sense of what loving community can look and feel like.

We are the sequel to this Acts story – and the Spirit is calling us to unlearn our prejudices and our preconceived ideas of what church should be. Instead, these conflicts that come with diversity call us to let Scripture and Spirit open us to God's Dream. Amen.