

Spirit Mischief

Congratulations! It is a joy and honor to be here for your anniversary celebration, to join you in blessing this marker point in the life of this congregation. We offer thanksgiving for the faithful ancestors who have kept this congregation beating with the love of Christ through all these years! 175! You are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who are still cheering you on. They are encouraging you to keep to your covenant call to witness and experience the good news of Jesus Christ.

Ken and I want to be counted in that number who rise up to call you “blessed.” Our spirits have been revived through the beautiful music of Friday night, the graced banquet of Saturday night, the shared time with friends Paul and Wendy. We bear witness to the power of your love and grace in this holy place. Thank you.

It’s Pentecost Sunday, the birthday of the church. It’s Spirit time!

Years ago I was in Chicago for a meeting. I attended church on Sunday morning with my friend, Susan Lockwood. It was the kind of church that immediately invited Susan and I to join the other clergy on the podium. We were ushered to chairs right in front of the drummer. It was terrific. The first song lasted about 10-15 minutes and we were feeling it. While the congregation was clapping and singing, the pastor of the church walked over to me, and whispered, “Would you read the scripture lesson for the day? It’s printed right here in the bulletin.” Sure, I said. Then he said, “Just go the pulpit as soon as the song ends.” Ok. Thank you.

I glanced at the printed words. The verses were straight out of Titus. I couldn’t believe it. “Wives be submissive to your husbands.” And then a few verses down: “Slaves, be obedient to your masters.”

I leaned over to Susan and whispered, “Look at these verses! I can’t say them without a sermon coming after it.” She said, “The Spirit will give you what you need.” “The Spirit?” I said. “We don’t have time for the Spirit!” With that the music stopped and everyone sat down. Susan nudged me to the pulpit.

I started out. I got to the first troublesome passage, and said, “Wives, be in *mutual* submission *with* your husbands.” I looked at the pastor. He smiled. I went on. I got to the second troublesome verse, and said it as a question: “Slaves, be obedient to your masters?” The pastor laughed. Then a wave of laughter swept through the congregation. I thought that finally we’d interpreted those verses like they should’ve been interpreted all along...with laughter. I sat down. The pastor got up and said, “Pastor Nancy, I do believe you came here to preach today.” “Oh, no, no.” I said. “Oh, yes,” he said. “Come on up and give us a word.”

What was I going to do? I went back to the pulpit and preached, but whatever I was saying needed help. A woman came over to me, put her hands on my shoulders and said, “Preach it, Sister.” Then people started shouting from around the room, “Help her, Lord.

Help her.” Well, I got help. People were waving and clapping. I do believe it turned out to be one of my better sermons. I’m sorry you missed it.

It was a time that I like to call “Spirit mischief”...a time that you can’t plan or manage or control...but you step into it and you are all caught up in a moment...and you see each other differently, and you sense that there’s a Spirit at work that is just wild. Such a Spirit seems to like the surprise of stirring things up when we least expect it. Couldn’t we say that you’ve had 175 years of Spirit-mischief?

In the book of Acts the wild adventures of a people who came to be known as “church” were chronicled. It was Spirit-mischief the whole time. The letter was written to Theophilus, a name that means “Lover of God.” So all of you Theophilus-es, you Lovers of God, may you hear this far-away story as very near to you today.

It started with the followers of Jesus stuck in the waiting room. Jesus was gone but before he left, he gave his disciples one simple instruction. Wait. Not get busy, but wait. Who tells people to wait when there’s so much to be done? Wait, said Jesus. Wait for the Spirit.

Since it was the Jewish high and holy day of Pentecost, they waited together in Jerusalem. It was Shavuot, not only a celebration of the first fruits of the harvest, but a celebration of the giving of the law to the people at Mt. Sinai. All the people came to celebrate from all over the region. It was a parade of nations.

The disciples were gathered in one place. Did they wait in regret for the missed opportunities with Jesus? Did they wait wondering if they could have helped guide Judas from his tragic choices? Did they feel that their movement had failed? Waiting. It can create some inner turmoil.

Suddenly the rush of a mighty wind blew into the place they were sitting. It was as if a brush fire had ignited them. It seemed like their hair was standing on end as if on fire. Their tongues were set loose. Everybody talked. As the winds blew, the words flew. Then somehow they found themselves with the throngs of people. Everybody spoke up and spoke out. The Spirit offered simultaneous translation. Everybody heard each other, each in their own native language. The walls of division gave way to understanding. No one could’ve seen it coming. No one could’ve planned it. They still looked and sounded different, but their differences did not hinder them from opening their hearts to hearing each other. It was Spirit-mischief!

What did they hear? Stories. Stories about what God was doing in their lives, “speaking of God’s deeds of power.” (Acts 2:11) They jabbered away about the sightings of God in Mesopotamia, and Egypt, and Pamphylia, and parts of Libya and even in Rome! Rome? Could anything good come out of the capital of the Roman Empire? A place where the Emperor had a heart that was two sizes too small? But the Spirit blows where it wills, even in Rome.

The people were swept together by a Spirit of goodwill for one another. Their local experiences engendered global consequences. A spirit of hope seized the crowd. They felt a oneness, a not-aloneness, a unity like never before. Every language holy. Every people a witness to the Divine. They didn't know how to explain it. So the storyteller in Acts wrote, they were "amazed and perplexed."

But not everyone caught it. It's hard to believe but some had their arms crossed. The story says that some "sneered." You ever notice that there are "sneer-ers" in most any crowd? They said, "Oh, this is nothing more than the giddiness of wine drinkers at a festival. It's nothing."

But it was something! It was an uprising of the people. A people huddled in fear in a small room busted out, and joined with strangers who were longing for hope. The pulse of a people was heard and heralded. They found their voice. A community of resistance was born. It was the resurrection of the body, a communal resurrection of new life.

It was so wild, so new, so bold, so astonishing that they didn't have words to describe it. But Peter, a man who never had a loss for words, sure tried. He reached back to the prophet Joel to explain it and said something like this:

"Lovers of God, this story has been going on a long time. This is an unfolding story. We're smack in the middle of it. God said that the Spirit would be poured out on all flesh, with sons and daughters proclaiming it, and young ones seeing visions, and old ones dreaming dreams. People who've been enslaved, people who've been pushed aside, are rising up front and center. Just look at us! It's the breakthrough of God, in the same way that Jesus of Nazareth bore witness to the mighty deeds of God with power and wonders that he did among us. He was martyred. But he rose again. And now the same Spirit that raised him is rising up in us. We're celebrating the giving of the Law today allright. The law of love for each other and our neighbor. The law of God's transforming love. The law that is written on our hearts by the Spirit!"

"Awe came upon everyone." (Acts 2:43) A community was birthed that day. A liberated and liberating community. They were delivered of their weights of the past, and freed of fear for their future. It made them bold and generous. They re-imagined their life together. They gave themselves to healing and reconciling work. While the rulers built walls, they built bridges. We call this new convergence, this Pentecostal uprising of bridge-builders for peace and justice...we call it the birthing of the church.

The Spirit is often depicted as a beautiful white dove of peace. But the 5th century Celtic church imagined the Spirit as a wild goose on the loose. When you read the rest of the story, you realize it was a wild goose chase. If only the book of Acts had ended with that marvelous word about the people sharing everything in common, praying and eating and praising God together. Why not just tell the good stories in the history of the church? But no, we get a bit more. Chapter titles could have been listed: "The Troubles," "The Resistance," "The Conflicts," "The Jailings," "The Storms."

The love loosed at Pentecost became a love tested. Did such a love include the Gentiles at the table? The Italian military officer? The jailors? The Ethiopian eunuch? The vision at Pentecost stretched their hearts again and again, and they were changed. Their circles expanded. One of the charges leveled against the early church is that they “were turning the world upside down.” But isn’t that what love does? The over-all title of this history book of the early church could be *Spirit-Mischief: The Redemptive Power of God’s Love*. It could be the title of your church history too.

I close with a postscript to Pastor Paul’s sermon from last week about my pioneering path as a Baptist pastor. After the Southern Baptists kicked out our church for calling me as their pastor, the American Baptists welcomed us. Thank you. We were grateful to have a home. That moment in history felt like a Pentecost moment when sons and daughters were proclaiming, and new visions were emerging. There was a vibrancy and unity of purpose in the wider church that was propelled by the Spirit. A new day was dawning.

I never lost sight of that new day dawning, but I did lose sight of my place within it. After 8 years as a pastor, I resigned. I was weary. We’re different people when we’re tired. I thought the church needed a pastor who was not so tired. On my last day in the office I was packing up my files. I was full of a sense of inadequacy and failure. I felt like I hadn’t been a good enough pastor. I felt like I hadn’t done enough to break down the religious barriers that existed in our city. I felt like I hadn’t done enough to lead peace efforts with so much division and conflict around us. While I was sinking down, a man stopped by my office. I didn’t know him. “Pastor, can I see you a minute?” he asked. I agreed to five minutes. He went on. “I read in the newspaper that you were leaving town. When you came to pastor in this town, I was very opposed to you. I spoke out against you. I thought you were a heretic and going against the Bible. But I’ve been watching your church in these years. I’ve seen the good this church has been doing in the community. You do what Jesus did, feeding the hungry, and caring for people who others don’t care about. I slipped in the back into a church service one day, and I got to tell you, I experienced the love of God in this church. The Spirit is here. So I came here to ask for your blessing.”

A blessing? From me? On a day when I thought I had no blessings to offer? He experienced the love of God through the church! We gave each other blessing. I don’t remember one word that was said. But I remember to this day that the Spirit is up to more than we can ever imagine or know.

The fake-ist fake news that should concern us is the kind that seizes our soul and tries to convince us that nothing we do matters, or that God is not at work. As Ken Sehested said last night at the banquet: “Never forget that the One who draws us together, who mends our threadbare parts, is greater than the one who separates and segregates and tears at our seams.” Spirit-mischief!

Friends, these are dangerous times. Sometimes we get discouraged and think our work in vain. But then the Holy Spirit comes along and revives our soul again. It is just such a Spirit of transforming love that took hold of a group of un-degreed, un-ordained lay

people 2000 years ago, that gathering that we call the church. Such a love still has hold of you today.

Lovers of God, you're still sailing with the winds of hope and on the wings of grace. The Spirit is still making mischief...especially here, especially now, especially with this body of Christ's love called Noank Baptist Church. The Spirit is not finished with you yet.

---Nancy Hastings Sehested
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Noank Baptist Church
Noank, Ct.