

Is This A Pentecostal Moment?

Acts 2:1-13

As you are most certainly aware, because of the coronavirus we are currently passing through a very disruptive moment in the life of our county, our community, and our own congregation. But “disruption” is not necessarily the same as “destruction.” In fact, sometimes disruptive events are the birth pangs of a new and exciting life! Just ask any mother whose body was disrupted and whose life was upended by the process of giving birth! Yes, disruption can be the beginning of construction – the construction of something new and better!

Take Pentecost as an example. Today we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost. For our Jewish neighbors, Pentecost was and is a harvest festival that marks completion of the Spring harvest and commemorates the gift of God’s law to God’s people at Mount Sinai. But for the Christian community, Pentecost celebrates something new and something different. For us, Pentecost celebrates the gift of God’s Spirit to the Church of Christ Jesus. You see, just prior to his ascension, Jesus spoke to his disciples and “...ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. ‘This,’ he said, ‘is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now...You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’” (Acts 1:4-5, 8)

Well, ten days later, the Spirit came. And when he came, he disrupted everything! His very coming was a disruptive event. Acts 2:1-4 describes what happened. “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.”

Can you imagine how disruptive the Spirit’s coming was when he came among and fell upon those very first disciples? You see, when he came among them and fell upon them, they heard the sound of a blowing wind. But not just any old wind; they heard the sound of a rushing wind. And not just any old rushing wind; they heard the sound of a violent, rushing wind! In addition to the sound of a violent wind, they saw divided tongues of wild fire, with a tongue of fire resting on each of them. Finally, in addition to a violent wind and a wild fire, they heard the sound of clamorous speech. For when the Spirit fell upon them, each one of them spoke in the language of someone in the audience so that everyone could understand the message, not matter what language they happened to speak.

You see, it was all very disruptive. It was not at all done decently and in good order as our Presbyterian friends are wont to say when describing the perfect worship service! No, it was a hot mess! It was so disruptive that the crowd who witnessed it was “bewildered” (vs. 6), “amazed and astonished” (vs. 7), and “perplexed” (vs. 12). In fact, they were so

bewildered, amazed, astonished, and perplexed, that they accused the disciples of being drunk and disorderly in Acts. 2:13!

Yes, that first Pentecost was a disruptive affair. It wasn't just a disruptive affair; it had very disruptive consequences, too. Nearly everything the Jewish community held dear was disrupted and reconfigured under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the Church confessed Jesus as Messiah despite the vehement denials and violent objections of the Jewish religious order. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the Jewish Temple gave way to the Christian Church – a living temple – with every member of the Church comprising a living stone within it. Under the influence of the Spirit, the Jewish sacrificial system was replaced in Christian thought by the one great sacrifice of Jesus Christ – the Lamb of God who was slain from the foundation of the world to take away the sins of all. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the Mosaic Law was reinterpreted and Christians came to believe that it was actually fulfilled in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the old priesthood was replaced by the priesthood of all believers. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the old and acrimonious distinction between Jews and Gentiles dissolved; for in the community of the Holy Spirit, there is no longer Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, males or females; for all are one and everyone lives for all in the Spirit of Jesus Christ!

Can you see how disruptive Pentecost was? It was a disruptive event with disruptive consequences. And yet, out of this Pentecostal disruption, a new movement was born! And so, the Church came into being as a lifegiving force for the good of all and the glory of God! So you see, in celebrating Pentecost we are really celebrating God's gift of a good and godly disruption – the kind of good and godly disruption that the world needed then and still needs today.

All of this leads me to ask the following question: What if this present disruption is really a Pentecostal moment when God is working through the disruption of this pandemic to bring about something new? Please don't mistake what I'm saying. I'm not for a moment suggesting that God sent this pandemic. God doesn't sit in heaven slaying people for his pleasure! But what if he is working through this pandemic, by his Spirit, to disrupt some things that need disrupting? And what if we were to receive this disruptive event – or at least some parts of it – as a gift – as a gift of the Holy Spirit – who is using even this evil thing to bring about some good to the Church of Jesus Christ and for the world the Church is called to serve?

Believe me, my friends, when I say the American Church needs the gift of a good disruptions! As all of you are probably aware, the number of persons attending Church in America is declining, and has been for many years, while the number of people who have no religious affiliation is rapidly increasing. It seems old modes of worship and belief no longer hold with the current generation. And yet, the Church clings stubbornly to old methods and old messages that the present age finds increasingly devoid of meaning. We can continue to do this until we die or we can allow the Spirit to disrupt us and set us on a new and more constructive course. The choice is ours.

Well, I'm beginning to believe there are at least three things about the Church that need to be disrupted: our methods, our manner, and our message. First, our methods need to be disrupted. For far too long the Church has operated under the assumption that "if you build it, they will come." And so, we built our buildings and opened our doors in the hopeful belief that people would seek us out and join our fellowship. Well that hasn't been true for a very long time. And when churches do grow today, far too often they grow by simply swapping disgruntled members!

But increasingly, the current generation finds community of every kind – to include spiritual community – somewhere online. And this phenomenon isn't just confined to the younger generation. A lot of folks far older than me are more active on Facebook and social media than am I! But the point is this: it took a pandemic to put us online in a significant way! Without this disruption, we wouldn't have moved to an online worship service. Oh, we would have posted things on our website for people to see if they were of a mind to look. But now we're actively pushing out invitations and live streaming our worship services so people can join us from wherever they are and can tune in afterwards if they can't join us, for some reason, at the stated holy hour. And some of our small groups have begun to meet online, too. And do you know what? Some of those groups have better online attendance than they had when they were meeting in person!

Oh, we'll always need our building as a place for worship, ministry, and service. Some people will never willingly join an online community; they want to worship face-to-face – and that's okay. And other people can't worship online due to limits in technology, or bandwidth, or skill. But we're learning that it's not an either/or proposition but a both/and blessing. I expect this church will have in-person and online worship and small group gatherings well into the future and, as a consequence, will ultimately reach more people than ever before with the message of Jesus Christ. But that might not have happened without this present disruption!

And so, the Spirit is disrupting our methods. And the Spirit may also need to disrupt our manner toward others, too. You see, I began ministry back in the good old days of the Moral Majority. Do you remember them? They were the folks who had God's answer for everything and sought to superimpose it on everyone else by supporting politicians who favored their views and enacted laws that reflected their opinions. They had a bad case of what one commentator currently calls "knowingness: a cocksureness in their own perspectives and an eagerness to attack and destroy opposing views."¹ Well that attitude has spread to infect the whole ecology of our entire culture! Seems today, everyone has a bad case of knowingness – a cocksureness in their own perspectives and an eagerness to attack and destroy those with whom they disagree. This is true of the Church as well. So perhaps the Spirit needs to disrupt this ugliness – beginning in the Church – replacing

¹ "Memetic Mediation: The Hard Problem of the Culture War" by Peter Limberg. Published on *The Side View* at: <https://thesideview.co/articles/memetic-mediation-the-hard-problem-of-the-culture-war/>. Current as of March 28, 2020.

it instead with that humbleness we find expressed in the Prayer of Saint Francis which says:

Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace;
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
And where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,
Grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved, as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive,
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
And it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life. Amen!

A church possessing that attitude and modeling that manner toward others would certainly be a credit to the Christ we confess, and it would be far more attractive to the world we seek to serve – particularly the younger generation.

Finally, in addition to disrupting our methods and our manner, perhaps the Spirit needs to disrupt our message as well. Of course, Jesus should always be central to our message. And yes, Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. But maybe the “old, old story” needs a Pentecostal renewal, a good shaking, and the blessing of disruption in the service of God’s greater mission! Maybe we need to learn new ways of telling that old, old story - ways that better communicates with the current age and the present generation. After all, it’s no accident that we have four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – all of them telling the story of Jesus but each of them telling that story in a different way. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are very similar but there are some striking differences between them. And John is dramatically different from each of the other three. But each of them tells the story of Jesus in a way best designed to communicate with the audience they were specifically addressing. And we need to learn how to do the very same thing. You see, we’re singing the same old song to a generation that doesn’t like the tune and we need to find a new tune to carry the same or similar lyrics into the hearts of the present age. But I dare say we’ll not do that unless the Spirit comes and gives us a good shake, as he did those first disciples, on that first Pentecost Sunday so many years ago.

So perhaps the present pandemic is a Pentecostal moment – a moment of great disruption – a moment for deep reflection on old ways that need to give way so that new ways can be birthed among us. A moment when our old methods, manner, and message are being disrupted and transformed. May the Spirit give us grace to embrace this and

every disruption for the sake of God's mission, the glory of God's Son, and the good of God's world. Amen.