

“Claim Your Authority”

Acts 2:1-21

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Today is Pentecost Sunday. There are two very important things to remember that happened on Pentecost Sunday. The first is that it was the day the disciples first felt the presence of the Holy Spirit, the force that moved between them and united them. It swept in, caught them on fire, and invigorated them for the future. It was untamed and wild and a little bit confusing for them to get a grasp of what the Holy Spirit was, but they felt it and named it and they would forever be changed. In fact, they were so inspired by the Holy Spirit that in turn, the second thing happened on Pentecost: they created the first Christian Church. In some churches, on Pentecost Sunday they have a party to celebrate the birthday of the church. There are even congregations that sing Happy Birthday, dear Church, and share cake after worship. I'm all for the cake, but I think it is important to remember that two things happened on Pentecost, and the church is only the second of the two. I think that the birth of the church is wonderful to celebrate, but there is danger in putting the church before the celebration of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost calls us to remember that the Holy Spirit came first, and the church followed.

Before the birth of the church, the disciples are very much focused on trying to discern what God was telling them to do. They were practicing living up to Jesus' mission for them. There wasn't a whole lot of organization. They occasionally got together to talk and compare notes, but mostly they were out on the road, in homes with people, doing ministry and following their hearts. They were living their faith. In many ways, without having it named, they were living a Spirit-filled life.

Pentecost was a turning point. Instead of a bunch of rogue believers, vaguely tied to one another by their love for Jesus and God, they became one united Church. On Pentecost they found that they could understand each other even as they spoke in different languages. There was nothing keeping

them apart so the mission of the individual became the mission of the whole. They formed one ministry. And this is Good News. This is very good news--it's how we got here. But, without remembering that it is the Holy Spirit that wove them together, that planted the seeds of their uniting, we lose something. Even though the Holy Spirit led to the creation of the church, the Holy Spirit is still separate—it is greater than the church—it is a part of God. I wonder if some of raw energy and passion that was the focus before Pentecost, energy and passion that came from God, got misdirected when the focus instead became about the Church. Remember, the Holy Spirit is described as tongues of fire—uncontrollable and fierce. That is not usually the first description that comes to mind when we think about the Church... There is a bit of tension between the passion of the Holy Spirit and the institution of the Church. There is temptation to set aside that uncontrollable force of God in favor of something more controllable and easily managed.

I imagine that on the day after Pentecost, exhausted and bewildered after this wonderful, exhilarating moment, as they were deciding what this change meant for them, that was the day the first church committee was formed. I imagine that a month after Pentecost a disciple told the group about a new idea he had and someone replied, for the first time, “But we've never done it that way. Not in the whole history of the church. Not ever.” I wonder if over time they became so worried about this institution they were building that they spent more time talking about ministry and less time out in their communities doing ministry. I worry that if Pentecost is only a celebration of the Church, we forget that we need the Holy Spirit in order to continue to sustain and grow the church—to go in new directions if that is where God is calling us.

I may have just offended anyone who has ever served in any sort of leadership or volunteer position in this or any church. I don't intend to put down the church. Remember that my education, vocation, and career are completely invested in the Church. For fun, I go to conferences and read books about best practices and empowering committees to do the work we need to do to keep this place thriving. Have no fear: I love and believe in the Church and the business of the church and all that it

entails. But, I also love the Holy Spirit. That is the part of God that keeps us dancing with one foot in the door of the sanctuary and one foot out in the messy world.

I point out this double-edged sword of Pentecost, this movement away from the wild abandon of the first days of the disciples, not to put down the Church, but to point out that it isn't the only model. To point out that our business of being Church needs to be held in careful balance with our mission of being Christ-like followers of Jesus and his ministry. A balance between the energy and excitement, and even the fear, that the Holy Spirit can instill in us when our passions catch fire—and the organization and comfort that a well run church can bring. What we should strive for is a balance of the two. My hope that as we celebrate the church on Pentecost, we will also celebrate the work the Holy Spirit calls us to do.

The Holy Spirit calls us to do ministry out in the world. It calls us to find our passion and then act on it. The Holy Spirit leads us in new directions. It turns us upside down and inspires us and scares us when we don't understand what it is trying to do. The Holy Spirit requires that we trust that little voice inside ourselves that is nudging us to take a chance or to put ourselves and our ideas out into the universe for other people to hear. I also think the Holy Spirit helps us to claim our authority.

It takes a certain level of self-confidence to believe that you are capable of making a difference in the world, in a community, in a person's life. It takes a certain kind of self-awareness to be able to name your gifts. Once you can do that, you are poised to claim your authority. Claiming your authority is when you ask yourself “What am I passionate about? What difference can I make?” And then, you do it. You dive off the deep end and you go for it. There is a certain amount of disregard for the rules or the way we've always done things when you claim your authority. You have to be willing to try something completely wild. To be a trailblazer.

Claiming your authority is not the same as just going with the flow. It's about going to a meeting and quietly following the agenda. But it's about showing up and then speaking up a little louder than you ever have before and saying, “I have a crazy idea. I have a crazy idea, and I need your help to

make it better.” The Pastor at First Church Somerville, Rev. Molly Phinney Baskette says that is what she does in her church. She walks into a Social Action meeting or a Trustee meeting and she says, “I have a crazy idea, and I need your help to make it better.” She started saying that so much that church members started speaking up with their own crazy ideas. Pretty soon, they started to be known as a church that was doing crazy things, crazy things that were serving new members and were revitalizing them and were making them known as a church full of the Holy Spirit. They weren't afraid to claim their authority. They weren't afraid to listen to what the Holy Spirit was trying to tell them.

The Holy Spirit is working right here at South Church. We are not afraid to be a church caught on fire. We are not afraid to step outside the mold of the established church. One of the ways I think it is doing that is through our 2020 Vision Team. They are a group that is mindfully balanced between doing the business of the church—looking at our history and who we are—and imagining who we are called to be in the next several years. They are mapping our future, and they aren't afraid to send us to places we haven't gone before. By the time their work is done, we won't be taking baby steps or making small tweaks to adjusting models. Our whole church will be shouting, 'We have a crazy idea, and we are going to work together to make it possible!’”

The 2020 Visioning team is the un-committee-committee. They are hoping to shake things up. They want to break open our church and give birth to something that will excite us and inspire us and challenge us. They are paying attention to the structures that will support our ministry, but they are also fully alive with the Holy Spirit, listening to what God is calling us to do and be.

I want them to change their name to the Pentecost Team. I want to call them the Pentecost Team as an ongoing reminder to us all that the church is important, but the Holy Spirit comes first. And on Pentecost, it is a time for listening to the Holy Spirit. To moving with the Holy Spirit. To boldly stepping into our future together.

The Pentecost Team, formerly known as the 2020 Vision Team, needs our help to do their work. This is where claiming your authority comes in. The Pentecost Team is counting on us to claim our

authority. That survey you keep hearing about will help us understand who we are in this moment. It will give us a picture of our strengths and our weaknesses. It will be a launching point for trying new things and experimenting. But, it's hard to try new things when we don't know who we are. So you have been invited to claim your authority, to add your voice. Soon you might hear of other opportunities to talk about your hopes and dreams for our church. It might be a one-on-one conversation or a group discussion. That is your time to say, "I have this crazy idea. I have this vision of who we can be. I have these interests that I want to share with people." The Pentecost Team wants to hear all the ways we can imagine us being a community, a living body of Christ out in the world. They want to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to you. Your good ideas, your safe ideas, your whacky ideas, your million dollar dreams, all of it. They want to capture that moment of Pentecost—when the Holy Spirit took over and everything became clear. When people suddenly understood one another and found direction. It's not about a better meeting format or better policies. It's about doing ministry. It's about being disciples. It's about creating a community of faith that will still matter to our children and grandchildren.

I think it is important to celebrate the institution of the church. We do a lot of amazing things that are only possibly because of guidelines and experience and carefully thinking through every decision. That's true of our church, and every church that has ever existed. But Pentecost is not just a birthday party celebrating the start of an institution. It is a Thanksgiving. A Thanksgiving that God is still moving and shaping and weaving our lives together. It is a Thanksgiving for the ways in which we are called to love one another and love our neighbors and wrap the whole world up in that love. It is a celebration of the gratitude for a Holy Spirit and all the challenges and joys that come with being a Holy Spirit people. Pentecost is a day for claiming your authority, naming your gifts, and for getting carried away with our Spirit-filled passions, no matter how crazy of an idea they might seem. Amen.