

## Sail With the Spirit

Today is the day that we traditionally call the “birthday” of the church. Now, it seems possible – to me at least – that there might be some other possible candidates for that distinction. It might make as much sense to call Easter our birthday or maybe even Christmas. But what sets Pentecost apart is that this is the day that the community of Jesus’ followers made its public debut—the day the church burst onto the scene in the power of the Holy Spirit.

A power came over that small group of men and women that day that propelled them out of their hiding places to proclaim the good news that Jesus is the Messiah promised by the prophets. That power formed them into a community where “awe came upon everyone” – as Luke writes later in the second chapter of Acts. They were so devoted to Jesus and to each other that that they would even “sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:43-44). Their faith and new way of life was so infectious that by chapter 17 the apostles were known as the “men who are turning the world upside down” (Acts 17:6)!

In our Reformed tradition, the Scots Confession, which comes from the time of the Protestant Reformation, identifies three signs or “marks” of the true church--the Word rightly preached, the sacraments rightly administered, and church discipline rightly exercised. And there's no denying that these things are essential to the health

of the church. But that language is very dry and institutional, and when the church is really being the church we're anything but. We're alive and vital and active. And to be alive and dynamic, we need fire in our bellies and wind in our sails. We need the power of the Holy Spirit.

Actually, this image of the wind in our sails strikes me as a wonderful way to imagine the Spirit's work in the church. To begin with, in both the Hebrew language of the Old Testament and the Greek language of the New Testament, the word for "spirit" isn't some technical, theological word. It's an ordinary, everyday word that means not only "spirit" but also "breath" or "wind."

It's no accident that on the day of Pentecost, "suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind," or that the Lord told Ezekiel to call for the Spirit of God to "come from the four winds." And I would like to suggest to you this morning that when the church is being a community that turns the world upside down it is being a sailboat propelled by the wind of the Holy Spirit.

A sailboat goes where the wind blows it, and the art of sailing involves learning how to catch the wind's energy and move with it. Of course, if you're all serious and have work to do or a schedule to keep, depending on the power of the wind may seem like it has a lot of drawbacks. The wind comes and goes on its own schedule. It can shift direction on a whim, it can leave you sitting stranded in the middle of the ocean for days, or it can suddenly become so strong that it's terrifying.

Of course, we humans are clever enough that we're not going to leave ourselves at the mercy of the wind if we don't have to. In biblical times, the Romans

put slaves to the oars of their galleys, and in our time there's always steam or diesel or even nuclear power to let us "sail" wherever we want whenever we want whether the wind wants to cooperate with us or not!

I remember, for instance, my very first ride on a sailboat. It was in Buffalo Harbor, where Lake Erie ends and empties into the Niagara River. Our guide sailed us around the harbor and then down the river a ways – but there was no way to sail back *up* the Niagara River against the powerful current. But that was no problem. Because the boat had a motor that could drive us against the stream. And what's more, engineers had constructed the Black Rock Canal along one side of the river to eliminate the current altogether. We humans seem to like things that way. We like to be in control. We like stability and consistency and predictability. These days sailboats are for people who want to play. If you really want to get somewhere you need a motor.

In the session reports in the Belltower I've mentioned several times that we've been reading a book together called *Becoming a Blessed Church*. The author is a Presbyterian minister named Graham Standish, who is a pastor in western Pennsylvania. He has a lot of relevant things to say about the work of the Holy Spirit in the church. He doesn't talk about sailboats and motorboats, but he makes the same point. And he has a really ugly sounding term for what it's like when we try to make the church into a motorboat. He calls it rational functionalism, and it's all about doing things our way, trying manage or engineer our way to growth and success.

But the church of Jesus Christ is a sailboat. It has been designed by our Creator to sail on wind of the Spirit. And when the church goes where the Spirit propels us, life can be free and exhilarating. It seems natural and almost effortless – as natural as the day of Pentecost when Peter preached and three thousand people were added to the church in a single day. But sailing with the Holy Spirit has its wild side, too. Remember that when Jesus talks to Nicodemus in the third chapter of John about being born of the Spirit, he says, “The wind blows where it chooses ... [and] so it is for everyone who is born of the Spirit of God” (John 3:8-9). In the New Testament as the church sailed under the power of the Spirit it ran into its share of storms. There were times of persecution and conflict, but that conflict within caused the community to grow up, and the storms of persecution moved it outward from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria and into Asia Minor and Europe and even to Rome. Sailing under the power of the Spirit is an adventure!

When a congregation is being propelled by the power of the Spirit, its worship services are inspiring and there's a tangible passion for knowing Christ and following him. The church nurtures that passion, and a deep love grows between its members, a love spills that over into reaching out to those beyond the church. When a congregation is sailing under the power of the Spirit, its leaders empower everyone to discover their spiritual gifts and to hear God's call to ministry in Jesus' name.

Sailing a boat involves learning a certain set of skills. It involves reading the wind and the water. It involves setting the sails to take maximum advantage of the breeze, and ducking your head when the boom swings overhead. To sail with the

Spirit, the church needs to learn skills of discernment to discover where the Spirit is blowing and we need to learn the art of sailing to let the Lord propel us where he wants us to go.

When we look around us, God's Spirit is blowing mightily in the world. The church is growing by leaps and bounds in Africa and Asia and Latin America. I always find it curious, though, that when we start asking what we can learn from these brothers and sisters, we almost immediately put on our rational-functional hats and start asking engineering questions. Things like how are their churches organized? Or what programs do they have? But we can't transfer programs and strategies from a place like Kenya to the United States—our contexts are so completely different.

But it strikes me that much of this amazing growth is among people who are much more accustomed to the ways of sailboats than motorboats. And what we may be able to learn from them more than anything else is how to sail. At the core of the part of the church in Kenya I know anything about—the Presbyterian Church—are men and women and young people who are full of passion for following Jesus, who pray constantly, who give sacrificially who are constantly imagining and trying new ways to do the Lord's work. It's not paradise. There are conflicts and problems, and tremendous heartbreak at times. But they sail!

The question that faces the church in our time is whether we want to be a sailboat or a motor boat. Will we trust the power of the wind? Or will we try to keep our dependable old motor running? Will we set off on the adventure of going where the Spirit takes us? Or will we let our reliable old motor keep us straight and steady on

a course of our own choosing? Will we invest our precious resources in sailing lessons? Or will we spend our last dollar on engine maintenance?

We've come a considerable way in the past few years. Probably the biggest lesson that came from our GPS process was to recognize that we need to become more fully in tune with the Spirit—we need to learn to listen and discern—we need to learn to be open to the Spirit blowing wherever it will. Our session meetings have become occasions where we often spend as much time in worship and prayer as we do listening to committee reports. Our committees are beginning to become spiritual communities gathered to do the work of the church rather than just beginning with a pro-forma prayer before getting down to the “real work.” It's a slow, gradual process of re-learning. But sailing is an art best learned hands-on.

“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.” Are we ready to learn to sail again?

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