

“Change Agent”
Acts 2:1-8, 12-21; Ezekiel 37:1-14

Whenever I go to Rome one of my first stops is the French National Church. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Italian painter Caravaggio created the masterpieces in this church depicting the life of St. Matthew. “The Calling of St. Matthew” is my favorite and possibly his most famous. Yet, all three paintings are tucked away over a small altar at the end of the left aisle. Today, these three paintings are the only reason visitors come to the French Church. But in the seventeenth century they were a source of great embarrassment.

“The Calling of St. Matthew” illustrates Caravaggio’s controversial style. The first thing that strikes you about the painting is that everyone looks “normal.” Matthew is seated at the table with friends and associates in what looks a lot like the corner bar. They are all dressed in the clothing of Caravaggio’s current day. They are counting the money Matthew just wrenched out of people from his tax collecting. As Jesus beckons Matthew to follow him, Matthew points to himself saying, “Me?” His associates view Jesus with expressions ranging from disinterest to contempt. Jesus and Peter are also very ordinary looking, the only “holy” aspect of the painting being the almost inconspicuous halo around Jesus’ head.

Well, these paintings created a sensation. Depending on your generation, think of Madonna or Britney Spears, Lady Gaga, Rihanna or Miley Cyrus. They were seen as unholy, vulgar, tasteless. In all his paintings Caravaggio featured working people, the poor, the unseemly. Caravaggio, a drinker, womanizer, and brawler who knew well the inside of Rome’s police stations, employed in his paintings common, ordinary people he met in his everyday life. Instead of a sentimentalized view of biblical scenes, he painted them as they would have looked in his day.

Yet, people, especially religious people, found this unnerving. Caravaggio’s contemporary, the French painter Nicolas Poussin, looking at Caravaggio’s “Death of the Virgin” said: “I won’t look at it, it’s disgusting. That man was born to destroy the art of painting. Such a vulgar painting can only be the work of a vulgar man. The ugliness of his paintings will lead him to hell.” Yet, today, it is Caravaggio’s art we flock to see because his realism puts us in the painting. Looking at St. Matthew’s quizzical expression, seeing in his face the struggle of whether or not to let go of the money in his hands and follow Jesus, it could be each one of us sitting there.

One of the constant temptations of our spiritual journey is to set the biblical story apart from our everyday lives. How many of us have seen the Red Sea divide, the sun stand still, a blind man miraculously receive his sight, a person come back from the dead, or tongues of fire rest upon a crowd of people? I venture to say not a single person here has witnessed any of these. So we are

tempted to place the scriptures in another category of reality. Not that we don't believe them; quite the contrary, we vociferously defend them. But we don't see any of these instances as being relevant in our lives. Unlike Caravaggio, we don't dress the biblical characters up in our everyday clothes and visualize the stories as involving us.

And the narrative of Pentecost, the beginning or birthday of the Church, falls into this category. Jesus has been resurrected. He promises he will send the Holy Spirit to the disciples. But here they are huddled together in a room, scared, unsure, questioning, waiting. Then there comes a "sound like the rush of a violent wind," tongues, "as of fire," resting on each of them. They begin to speak in foreign languages. They are so rowdy people think they are drunk. Then, untrustworthy Peter, who denied Jesus three times, a fisherman from Galilee, stands before thousands of people and gives an eloquent explanation of the faith.

Now, we are tempted to read this passage as a supernatural event. You have a violent wind, tongues of fire, and miraculously being able to speak another language. But look at the wording — "a sound *like* the rush of a violent wind." "Tongues, *as* of fire." Whenever you have observed someone who was really angry, have you ever described them by saying, "You could see the steam coming out of his ears?" Have you ever noted someone in love by remarking, "Cupid shot an arrow straight through his heart?" Watching a Clemson football crowd after a touchdown have you ever said, "They were jumping for joy?" In our attempts to determine exact biblical interpretations, we have become so legalistic that we steam roll over the nuances, the metaphors, the humor of the Bible.

Was there literally a violent wind and tongues of fire? I don't have a clue. In the first century, when the author Luke was writing these words, it would not have been uncommon or unseemly to employ colorful phrases, not to be taken literally, but to describe the feeling of an event. That doesn't make it untruthful anymore than if I asked you to describe how you fell in love and you said, "I was head over heels. My heart was beating so hard I thought it would come through my chest. I didn't know if it was day or night. I couldn't focus on anyone but him. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. When he kissed me it was like an other worldly experience." Metaphor, allegory, satire. They are all employed in the Bible.

It doesn't matter whether you believe there was a literal physical wind and hot tongues of fire. But it greatly matters whether you believe that somehow the Spirit of God touched those early disciples in a powerful way. And most importantly, that the Spirit of God can and will touch you in the same manner if you allow it.

An energy savvy consumer replaced all the windows in her house. She had expensive, double-insulated, energy efficient windows installed. Twelve months later, she received a call from the contractor, complaining that the work had been done for a year but she had failed to pay for it. The consumer replied, "The

salesman who sold me those windows told me that in one year they would pay for themselves.”

All human speech or writing can be interpreted in many different ways. But the Word of God contained in the Pentecost account is clear. God’s Spirit came to the disciples in a powerful and life changing manner.

When we believe God can and does work within us as God did that day on Pentecost, then our present spiritual lives, and our view of the future, take on a different texture. What occurred there can happen to us.

Visualize the situation. The disciples, whether it was the 12 or 120, we’re not certain, but Jesus’ followers are there in a room together. Undoubtedly, they are wondering what, if anything, will happen. Their post-resurrection glimpses of Jesus are beginning to fade. What does the future hold? What should they do? Should they just pack up and go back to Galilee? Was it a nice run, but now it’s over? And what about their cowardice, their betrayal of Jesus during the dark days of his arrest and crucifixion? How does one forget that? Does God forget it? An uncertainty, a pall of fear, a restlessness must have blanketed the assembly.

But then the Holy Spirit comes upon them and they are transformed. Peter becomes the poster boy for the new life. Peter, who denied Christ not once, or twice, but three times, becomes the group’s spokesperson. Powerfully and eloquently, this fisherman expounds the truth found in Jesus. And from this very moment the Church explodes into God’s most potent vehicle for love and goodness in the history of the world. But the center of the story, the crux of Luke’s narrative is describing how depressed, frightened, defeated, powerless men and women become bold, aggressive, confident proclaimers of God’s love. And showing us this Luke wants us to ask if we are allowing the Pentecost experience within ourselves.

Now, this doesn’t mean we have to hear a violent wind and see tongues of fire. What it does mean is that the Spirit of God works within us to change us and in turn to lead us to reach out to others. We believe the Holy Spirit resides within the life of every Christian to empower us to live boldly in the manner of Christ. If we are willing, the Spirit touches our hearts and minds, makes us more loving, more forgiving, more generous, more Christ like. Like these disciples, the Holy Spirit will empower our ways of thinking and acting.

It is no different today than it was almost 2000 years ago. God’s Spirit has not changed. The disciples were no better or worse than us. But they were waiting, watching, wanting God to speak to them. Do you and I want the Spirit to work within us?

A husband and wife were getting ready for bed. The wife was standing in front of a full length mirror and taking a hard look at herself.

“You know, dear,” she says, “I look in the mirror and I see an old woman. My face is wrinkled. My backside kind of sticks out. My hair is gray. I’ve got fat legs and my arms are all flabby.”

She turns to her husband and says, “Tell me something positive to make me feel better about myself.”

The husband thinks for a minute and then says in a soft, thoughtful voice, “Well, there’s nothing wrong with your eyesight.”

The next day the paper noted that the husband’s funeral would be held Monday at Fifth Presbyterian Church.

Sometimes we really don’t want to know the truth. You and I need to take a long, hard, honest look into the mirror of our hearts and ask, “Do I really want God’s Spirit to work within me?”

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The Spirit of God changes us. We love more. Give more. Forgive more. We construct our lives around an attitude of helping others. Self is supplanted by God. Our goals, our values, our possessions, our thoughts, our motives are tested by the fire of faith. We are not perfect. Quite the contrary. But we are forgiven. And it is that sense of love and forgiveness we want to pass on to others. God’s Spirit speaking to our hearts and minds makes all this possible.

This morning, has Pentecost come to your heart? Don’t worry about wind and tongues, but do seek love and forgiveness. The Holy Spirit can and will work to make you and me followers of Christ. And, like those first disciples, what we have to do is seek it and want it. Today, do you want it?

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