

Psalm 104:24-34
Acts 2: 10-13

“Inebriating Spirit”
Pentecost
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A newly-ordained pastor was attending one of her first meetings at the church to which she had recently been called. Suddenly one of the officers of the church went on a tirade against the leadership of the church and the new pastor, who had only preached once. The upset member said that the pastor was inept, inexperienced – that last week’s sermon was poorly delivered. Also, because of the poor leadership of the congregation, “the whole church was being led down the road to perdition – a milder term, for the word that was actually used...”

The new pastor was devastated by these critical comments and wondered what she had done in so short a time to deserve such a fierce rebuke. As she was nursing her wounds after the meeting, another member of the church attempted to comfort her by whispering in her ear, “Preacher, don’t take it personally.” (How could anyone not take such charges personally, she wondered!) The member continued in a whisper, “What he was saying was.... well, you see... Ben has a drinking problem – and what he said tonight ... well, what he said was the liquor talking.”

We have all heard that expression, haven’t we – “that was the liquor talking.” The phrase reminds us that what the person is saying is being communicated “under the influence” as we so carefully put it in politically correct terms. In other words, the person speaking shouldn’t be held entirely responsible for the words spoke. Rather blame their caustic, irrational, rude and inappropriate speech on the alcohol.

Yet this poor new pastor, later confessed to a group of fellow clergy that she had to admit to herself, after much prayer, that much of what Ben crudely said to her, she feared was true! She had to admit she was inept – or at least unprepared in many ways. She was fresh out of seminary and supposed to know a great deal about Bible, theology and church government, but she had no real church life experience. Yet this congregation was looking to her for leadership? Why she hadn’t even preached more than half a dozen times before – but she was trying to work on that and wanted to improve.

There is an expression in Latin: *In vino, veritas!* - In wine there is truth! So apparently we do say crazy, meaningless things when “under the influence,” but sometimes that could mean barriers and inhibitions are removed, and we are speaking the truth....

A doctor related to a college chaplain at a major university a theory he had been working on. The doctor hoped to show a linkage between alcohol addiction and a lack of spiritual ability, and he reasoned that a university campus where there is an overabundance of alcohol abuse might serve as his laboratory. His theory was that one of the reasons that people get addicted to alcohol is what he labeled “spiritual ineptitude.”

According to his theory, some people who are just not good at spiritual matters attempt to solve their spiritual cravings through alcohol, taking the easy shortcut of imbibing alcohol in order to express their spiritual side. That was his theory at least. He had even devised a questionnaire in which he thought he could measure a person’s spiritual level by asking them about their prayer habits and religious practices. Having tried his questionnaire on a few known alcoholics, he already had been able to correlate a high proportion of alcoholics among those who scored low in spiritual practices.

An interesting theory perhaps. But in all fairness to millions of people who struggle with issues of alcohol abuse, it would do us well to be reminded that according to scripture, all of us are spiritually inept. And didn’t Jesus even bless those who are “spiritually poor” - that is the spiritually deficient, saying that we would receive even more Spirit?

I share all of this background because of the text we shared a few moments ago from the Book of Acts. What we initially hear in this passage is a response to the arrival of the Holy Spirit on a group of people gathered to celebrate a Hebrew feast called Pentecost. There is the rush of a mighty wind; there is fire and there are disciples speaking aloud in many different languages. The effect of all these intelligible tongues is confusing to the crowd. In fact, they accuse the apostles who are speaking in so many varied and intelligible languages of being inebriated. So the Spirit descends, the good news is shared, and the crowd responds in unison with, “They are drunk!” Peter denies the charge in an almost humorous retort, “But it’s too early in the morning for us to be drunk.”

What the crowd interprets as drunkenness, Peter then interprets through a sermon he preaches, just beyond our text. He says that what happened is a wonderful revelation that points all this commotion to the fulfillment of the promise from the prophet Joel. Joel had promised that God’s Spirit would be poured out on all flesh – even among the Gentiles. And that a variety of people, including young and old would be able to prophesy in the spirit – testifying to signs visible and audible.... And all would be saved.

Peter's sermon, utilizing the quote from Joel, becomes a sort of preview for the whole rest of the Book of Acts where speeches are more important than any other book of the Bible, and the Spirit propels all sorts of people to speak up and testify to the good news. So a new age has now dawned with strange, odd, wonderful and disruptive signs. To be a Christian, therefore, is to participate in the signs and wonders of this new age of the Spirit.

When I was ordained nearly 38 years ago, and when many of you were ordained as elders and deacons, hands were laid upon our heads and a prayer was offered asking for the Holy Spirit to be present from then onward. The Holy Spirit is at the heart of every ordination. It is a reminder that Christians are not meant to accomplish any of the high, difficult work that Jesus sets before us WITHOUT a stiff drink of the Holy Spirit. Ministry in any of its forms is too demanding and too difficult to accomplish unaided. We need to imbibe the Spirit to strengthen our determination to obey Jesus no matter what.

Every Sunday after the scripture is read and before the sermon is shared, we have a prayer for Illumination, like: "Open our hearts and minds to the power of your Holy Spirit so that we might hear what you would say to us today." What is being requested in those words is for a "drink of the Spirit." It is an acknowledgement that none of us here – no matter how smart or mature in the faith – can read, preach or hear God's word all by ourselves; we need spiritual help. Presumably we don't need a prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit if the goal is to be a productive garden club, or an effective community service organization, or a political party rally. But if we aspire to be something so bold, so countercultural, as the body of Christ ... well, we need to be a partaker of the Holy Spirit.

Frank Kermode in an essay entitled, *A Literary Guide to the Bible*, looks at the ethical and moral demands Jesus puts on his disciples. Kermode uses the expression, "the rhetoric of excess" to describe Jesus' teachings. For example we hear in the texts, "Unless your righteousness EXCEEDS that of the scribes and the Pharisees...." Or, "You have heard it said, but I say to you..." And thus Jesus told his disciples that they are to exceed in forgiveness, in love, in generosity, in caring, in fellowship, in faith.

Kermode then goes on to say that this 'rhetoric of excess' also finds expression in the hyperbolic – the exaggerated language of Jesus - found so often in the Gospel of Matthew.... For example: "First, take the log out of your own eye, and then you can take the splinter out of another's eye." "If a child asks you for a fish, would you give a snake?" "You strain gnats, but you swallow camels." "It is easier

for the camel to go through the eye of a needle that for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

The ‘rhetoric of excess’ is also used in the parables of Jesus, such as the one of the king who called in his servant to give an account. He had one servant who owed him 10,000 talents, which translates into about \$10 million and about 150,000 hours of labor by our modern valuation – and the king went on to forgive a \$10 million debt! That servant went out and saw a fellow servant who owed him 100 denai (about 18 dollars) and grabbed him by the throat, demanding payment. Ten million dollars – vs. 18 dollars ...now do we get the ‘rhetoric of excess’?

I refer to this “rhetoric of excess’ because it reminds us that we can’t speak about the gospel - the expansive love and grace of God – with speech that is restrained and cautious – We need the power of the Holy Spirit to adequately testify! It think it is safe to say that for many of the Christians who identify themselves as the more “charismatic” among us, the Spirit of Christ can always be experienced at least one step beyond the normal. In other words, Jesus is always present, but we must take a step of faith to truly experience him.

So no one should expect the Holy Spirit help them ‘walk on water’ if they are not willing to step out of the boat. If you are sitting, you need to stand. If you are standing, you need to clap. If you are clapping, you need to dance. If you are dancing, you need to shout. What the Spirit does is move us out of our comfort zones..... The Holy Spirit is always attempting to expand our faith and our calling. It is given to help us leave behind our needless inhibitions and be filled with the wonder of wherever the spirit will take us.

Wait! Is Dan subtly referring to these different expressions and experiences of worship this summer? Ah.... Yes he is! For if there is one thing that first day of Pentecost teaches us, is that Jesus intends for us to move outside our comfort zones – outside of Jerusalem – to move “outside the box.” Am I comfortable with that? No.... it challenges and frightens me too! But then I remember Jesus told us that if we are going to imbibe in the Spirit, THAT “new wine requires ... requires new wine skins!”

A presbytery executive made a visit to a once-thriving down-town church. This congregation once had a reputation for an outstanding music program, large youth groups, and even had their Sunday services broadcast on the radio station. But now they were in decline: no vibrant youth program, no radio broadcast, only a small choir remained. They had been declining for a number of years so that now the only thing left was the morning worship with fewer than 100 people in

attendance. The pastor was clearly depressed; “What am I going to do?” the poor pastor asked the executive.

The executive later shared with another colleague, that though he didn’t say it, this is what he thought: “Go out and buy a 180 gallons of wine – it has happened before as recorded in the second chapter of John when Jesus provided the refreshments for a sagging wedding bash – ‘Cause what this congregation needs is a drink of the Spirit.”

Well, at that first birthday party of the church, Pentecost, things went like this: We had a nice multicultural turnout to celebrate a festival. We were having nice, calm gathering in our meeting room, on this fiftieth day after the ceremony of the barley harvest. It was a beautiful, crystal-clear day and the festival was being celebrated “decently and in order,”

But then ... a rushing wind ... and fire ... the Spirit descended. People started talking louder and louder... and yet it was not really babbling because they were using intelligible languages. And all these people from so many other cultures and languages could actually hear and understand. Because of all the commotion, a larger crowd began to gather in the streets, outside the meeting room. “Look! They’re doing exactly what they did when Jesus was with them – they’re drunk!” Peter comes out to make an explanation: “We’re not drunk ... its only nine in the morning.”

So, let’s be honest here. We are drunk ... or we should be ... well sort of ... It’s the one kind of inebriation that is permissible in the church. We are allowed to be drunk on the possibilities for the new kingdom since God has promised and delivered the Holy Spirit to descend. The Spirit has already descended and remains with us with regularity now. It was given to help us speak the good news and to hear God’s further call. We are supposed to be drunk with the possibilities of life in this new world now that God is with us.

So today we have God’s permission to cast aside all those needless inhibitions, and get inebriated ... inebriated by the Spirit. Amen.

