

Polyglot Cowlicks

Acts 2:1-21

Rev. Jenaba Waggy
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There are a lot of moving parts in planning the two services of this church, which means that I need to have my text and title for sermons set well before I actually sit down to write them. I felt so very clever with this one—I'm always pleased to be able to use "polyglot" in any sentence, fun word that it is, and I was going to anchor the illustration in the reality of the several cowlicks I discovered when I cut two feet of hair off in graduate school. Is not this so like the Spirit, I thought, those hidden surprises that one cannot control, that live outside of the normal rules. You may have noticed that the cowlick in my bangs, for instance, will not lie flat for love nor money.

It is a fine illustration, a good point—the Spirit is surprising, this moment of Pentecost is uncontrollable. It is clever; cute, even. But the longer this text swam around in my mind and the more times I read it, the stronger my realization that it is an absolute injustice to this moment of our faith to make it clever or cute. Professor Frank Crouch of Moravian Theological Seminary writes that, "If familiarity does not exactly breed contempt, it does tend toward the domestication of scripture's most unruly, norm-busting stories. Incarnation, resurrection, and the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit upon all flesh find themselves toned down into quiet images of a baby in a manger, a bunny with a basket, and a burning breeze that swept through some distant place in a distant age, leaving perhaps only a trace of its passage among our own people in our own time."

"...English translations also underplay the fear-inducing, adrenalin-pumping, wind-tossed, fire-singed, smoke-filled turmoil of that experience. Those who observed this Pentecost visitation from outside the room are described in the NRSV as 'bewildered' (v. 6), 'amazed and astonished' (v. 7), and 'amazed and perplexed' (v. 12). The Greek terms describing their reactions could be appropriately rendered (following the lead of various lexicons) as confused, in an uproar, beside themselves, undone, blown away, thoroughly disoriented, completely uncomprehending."¹

"When the day of Pentecost had come...there was a *violent* wind," there were flames singing the tops of James's cowlick, there was a cacophony of people speaking the good word of a God powerful enough to defeat death and loving enough to teach us the wonder of a life lived in grace. This is not a polite moment of a well-ordered church service but a hurricane upending all the ideas of what the fledgling faith would be. All genders, all ages, all races were welcome, were empowered, were made majestic and weird and beautiful in the glory of the Spirit. The languages here were from everywhere around the Roman Empire; the Spirit did not make a difference between citizen and noncitizen, between country visitor and city slicker, between the poor and the rich. Everyone, *everyone* who listened could hear of a God Who said, "Come and see."

I do not know about you, Church, but I am living in a time where I need a faith like that. I need a faith that focuses less on being clever and more on being countercultural, less on being comfortable and more on being deliberately connected to a world that looks at us as Christians

¹ [Commentary on Acts 2:1-21 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2015

and says we are drunk at nine—at ten—in the morning. This story that we tell each other every year about the miracle of bringing people together is so easy to fold into a one-day celebration of global Christianity instead of burning us out of our familiar cocoons and into the crowded marketplace to shout about the idea that this religion is one we *choose*, that this God is One that *chooses us*, that we are forever changed by the wind that scoured us clean and shoved us onto a different path.

Here is the thing: it is Pentecost, the holy day that was fifty days after Passover and already built into the Jewish calendar—hence why it is noted that there are all the devout Jews in town in the first place. It is Pentecost, the holy day that almost always gets eaten by our American Memorial Day with the mattress sales and the Indy 500 and everyone’s graduation. It is Pentecost, and we wear red to say that this day is the birth of the Church and that is worth noting like we have done anything to grow up beyond that birth.

It is Pentecost, and 2,000 years after Peter himself had to defend the sobriety of his fellow believers, we make it cute and clever—and people ask why the Church has not died yet.

I don’t need to cite to you the sheer amount of articles talking about how Americans are less religious than we used to be, or how the UMC is fighting with itself not only about sexuality but about membership levels, or about how many millennials and gen Z-ers and gen Alpha kids look at the Christian Church with distrust. I can, if you are interested; I have a whole list of such articles, because it is my job to be in the know about that. But I do, from this pulpit and this official status as a preacher, need to remind you that every year we get this chance to be bowled over by the reality of the Spirit and what the Church *could* be, occasionally is *trying* to be, most certainly is being *invited* to be. I do need to remind you that Pentecost yanked the Church sideways and introduced God’s presence in a way that no one was prepared for. There was a violent wind and tongues of fire and the world changed and we are absolute fools if we think that being the Church is about showing up a few weeks a month but refusing to let the fire burn through every single day we have, remaking the landscape of who we are and what we value.

It takes work, this being-the-Church thing, because humans are humans no matter the time period. Even the story in Acts is not perfect; no part of Acts is, no matter how much Luke idealized it. We as humans are very good at looking at what God can do and asking for it to be different, easier, better scheduled on a Monday night or in the building that is familiar or with people who look like us. Dr. John Holbert writes that, “surely [there was] excitement and conviction and joy in coming to the early communities of Jesus. And just as surely, many of these converts did in fact devote themselves to ‘teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers’ (Acts 2:42). But the scoffers and the unconvinced were many, we can be certain. After all the next stories will speak of Ananias and Sapphira, who join but hardly change their stingy ways (Acts 5). And later we will hear Paul preach on the Areopagus, and the result of his sermon will be two converts and many skeptics (Acts 17).” Christianity may be the world’s largest faith system, but we “are so diverse and often so distrusting of one another that we remain a first century church after all, with some joyfully announcing the good news of the love of Jesus for all while others announce hatred and anger toward those who do not experience the faith as they do.”² Being the Church takes focus and action and hope and fire burning within, and we all have different ideas of how that works.

² [The Offering of Which Gospel? Reflections on Pentecost \(Acts 2:1-21\) \(patheos.com\)](https://patheos.com/2013/05/28/the-offering-of-which-gospel-reflections-on-pentecost-acts-2-1-21/)

So, First UMC, who are we? It's Pentecost, and we're heading into a summer where you'll be hearing several different voices from the pulpit—perhaps not different languages, but certainly different ways of preaching, different approaches to the Scripture that binds us together. You may not like some of them, and that is fine. Learn from them, anyway.

It's Pentecost, and we wear red to tell others we're on fire with the good work of doing good and we have spilled into the streets to *talk* about how we are working on being anti-racist, how we are LGBTQ inclusive, how we are friendly and growing and willing to be the hands and feet of Christ in Ann Arbor and beyond.

But are we drunk on new wine, unable to put action behind our words as we slur our way through the values we state? Ann Arbor, as of last summer, was 70% white³ and, in a study done last month, was becoming so expensive that 77% of renters were priced out of buying any property here.⁴ Twenty-two percent of Ann Arborites live below the poverty level,⁵ many of them people of color. Organizations like Alpha House and Habitat for Humanity are doing good work; are we supporting them with our calendars and our pocketbooks as well as with our space at the lectern? Ann Arbor reflects the national statistics for LGBTQ folks; 28% of LGBTQ youth nationwide report homelessness or housing instability, and the numbers only get higher when you narrow the scope to focus on race or transgender identities.⁶ Are we standing with them to be voices for equity and possibility, dreaming new dreams and putting the power of the Church behind the change they are making?

“In our own languages, we hear them speaking about God's deeds of *power*,” said the amazed people gathered for one ceremony and witnessing a shocking other. First UMC, what if we were to dream, to vision, to take Pentecost like a fire lit in our souls to witness to the truth that we have been changed to bring change? What if we were to get serious about anti-racism such that we created deliberate space in our Weaving Beloved Community work to listen to the voices of people of color and stop talking if we are white folk who cannot know racism from the inside; for we who are white to do our own education and stop assuming that our surprise at how deep racism goes is a surprise to those who experience every shade of it? What if we were to get serious about being queer-inclusive so that our flags were not decorations but commitments to learning new pronouns so as not to misgender people or recognizing that not every queer person needs to have a spouse and kids to be valid in the world? What if we were to take this summer—and all summers, but this one of new voices and uproarious wind—and this holy day of Pentecost to listen to the young and the old who are dreaming dreams and seeing visions beyond the church we have now, to the people of every gender thinking about how we can be a deliberate force for safety and hope in this town, to recognize that neither our name nor our history will save us but our God will most certainly sustain us through all the unknowns yet to come?

What if we were Christians in such a way that the Spirit shone through us like a beacon on a hill, moved like a wind that knocks whole systems down, transformed the world like we keep saying we want Her to?

³ [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Ann Arbor city, Michigan](#)

⁴ [77% of Ann Arbor-area renters priced out of homeownership, study finds - mlive.com](#)

⁵ [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Ann Arbor city, Michigan](#)

⁶ [Homelessness and Housing Instability Among LGBTQ Youth | The Trevor Project](#)

It is Pentecost, Church, and I still cannot get my cowlicks to lie flat for love or money. But it is so incredibly far beyond time for me to stop trying to make the Spirit be as predictable as a metaphor, as contained as a cowlick, as docile as a story confined to a Sunday morning when God roars in the fire of every language needed to say *there is more; come with Me, come and see*.

Let me know if you want to get started, Church. I most certainly cannot do the work alone, and once I catch my breath from being knocked over, I will need a hand up to start walking the journey. May we walk it together. Amen.