

Jon Hauerwas – May 20, 2018 – “The Spirit at Work”
Romans 8:22-27 and Acts 2:1-13

I have never been a fan of roller coasters. For one, I don't like heights. But, more importantly, I don't like feeling out of control. It's the same reason that I prefer to drive my own vehicle rather than fly as a passenger on a commercial airliner, despite countless reminders that I am actually safer in the air. No. I am not wracked with latent trust issues, and no one has ever accused me of being a control freak.

If anything, these tendencies are probably more in keeping with America's notion of rugged individualism. According to this cultural myth, rugged individuals settled the west by taming both the natural elements and the unpredictable wild. It is all part of a long history we have of honoring those who seek to control and shape their own destiny.

Perhaps, this helps explain our current, national preoccupation. Whatever the problem, we seek to quantify it, study it, and understand it inside and out with the primary intention of manipulating more favorable future outcomes. And yet, you may recall that Paul once wrote that “the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.” The weakness of God, of course, is a “self-emptying weakness,” most clearly revealed on the cross.

And so the question for us, as people of faith, is whether we believe that God's weakness can really prevail over identifiable, earthly powers.¹

For rational, intellectual Christians, the notion of God's weakness is often an "embarrassing scandal" which defies our intellect and our pragmatic common sense.² Unwilling to be outwitted, "we appeal," as Walter Brueggemann reminds us, "to a business model for his church. We reduce mystery to program and budget and building and membership rolls; they all turn out to be empty of transformative potential... Thus we learn over and over many times that... the weakness of God has transformative power. We appeal to Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King and the all-stars in vulnerability that have made such a difference. We do not need, however, to look so far. The weak ones are active among us everywhere; they are those who are naïve and innocent and vulnerable and self-giving... who persist in self-giving generosity."³

One of the great joys of serving as a pastor is the opportunity to interact with those who are actively considering their faith. My eight-year-old son asks a sincere question about Jesus. A confirmation student declares that faith and the church have

¹ Brueggemann, Walter, "Getting Your Sibilant Right: The Evangelical Shibboleth," *Journal for Preachers*, XLI/4 (Pentecost 2018), 30.

² *Ibid.*, 30.

³ *Ibid.*, 30 – 31.

become an important part of his or her life. A couple opts for a church wedding because they long for a spiritual component in their covenant. A relatively new, adult believer wonders aloud why the gospels differ.

Our second lesson this morning describes the birth of the church. Then, a few verses later, we learn that “those who welcomed (Peter’s) message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” The number mentioned, 3,000, is “meant to evoke the thousands to whom Jesus spoke and with whom he broke bread.”⁴

And yet, as Jason Byassee reminds us, these new believers “do not form the First Pentecostal Megachurch with thousands on the rolls. No. They go home. Back to every obscure corner of the Mediterranean from which they came. They start countless mini-churches. They scatter like seeds with little promise of taking root, though some do. This is a Pentecostal habit that our churches, especially in North America, would do well to notice: the biblical pattern is not one of hunkering down,

⁴ Jason Byassee, “The Holy Spirit’s New World Order,” *Journal for Preachers*, XLI/4 (Pentecost 2018), 18.

growing giant megaliths, with oceanic parking lots and pyrotechnic entertainment. Pentecost's vision is lots of mini-churches rather than a mega-one.”⁵

In John's Gospel, we find these words: “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” The church “bears witness that the way things are is not the way things have to be. God is capable of doing a new thing. God is, in fact, doing a new thing right now. It's called ‘church.’ Ethnic and national identities dissolve in the waters of baptism. Demarcations of wealth and power are ground down and crushed in bread and wine.”⁶

And at the center of all of this is the Spirit – that force which propels us forward in faith. My previous congregation in Washington State overlooked a bay. On Thursday afternoons, a sail boating club departed from the marina and spread out across the water displaying a variety of beautiful hulls and canvases. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to go sailing a few times. Some generous member of the church would invite my family out and we would spend the day with them.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

As any sailor will tell you, you can sail against the wind or, ideally, with the wind. But, no wind is a sailor's worst enemy. As people led by the Spirit, we are constantly in the midst of these changing directions of the wind. At times, it feels as though we are struggling against God. At other times, the wind is, indeed, at our backs. May we go as the Spirit leads us in life and in faith. May it be so, and all thanks be to God both now and forever. Amen.