

Pentecost Power

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Acts 2:14-21

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

Confirmation, too often, is seen as graduation from church rather than initiation into church.

Three ministers were commiserating about a common problem in their churches, bats in their bell towers. The first minister became so frustrated with the bats that he resorted to taking a shotgun, when no one was around, and shooting at them. He drove the bats away for awhile, but they're back. He still has a bat problem, but now he also has holes in the roof from shotgun blasts.

The second minister had an ingenious idea. She chased the bats into nets, loaded the nets into her mini-van, drove the bats to the country and let them go. But the bats returned before she did.

The third minister wasn't saying anything. He just sat there with a smug look on his face. When they asked him what he did to exterminate the bats, he answered proudly, "I baptized them and confirmed them and I haven't seen them since!"

This story would be funny, if it weren't true! Seventy percent of people who have attended a Protestant Church in high school drop out of church by age 23. I have watched this scenario play out in our church over the last 30 years. It's not uncommon to confirm high school students in this church and never see them again. I don't want to rain on the parade of the 59 high school students confirmed into our church today, but

we must face the brutal facts. Confirmation, too often, is seen as graduation from church rather than initiation into church.

There is a silver lining in these dark clouds, according to Lifeway Research. Thirty-five percent of dropouts resume attending church by age 30. Those who stay or return to church usually have three things going for them. They tend to have parents committed to church and spiritual growth. They have a pastor whose sermons are relevant and engaging. They have people in their church who are investing in the spiritual development of its students.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, sometimes called the birthday of the church. It's the day the Holy Spirit fills Jesus' disciples with power to become his witnesses. God's Big Story doesn't end with Jesus. God's Big Story continues in the lives of people then as now who are filled with the Spirit of God the Father and Jesus the Son.

Acts testifies how these once timid disciples are transformed into bold witnesses for Jesus Christ. Take Peter, one of the 12 original disciples. At Jesus' trial, Peter denies three times in rapid fire succession any association with Jesus. Now we find him on Pentecost preaching with uncharacteristic boldness. Peter's sermon in Acts 2 results in 3000 people becoming followers of Jesus (2:41).

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Peter interprets Pentecost as fulfilling ancient prophecy. “In the last days,” that is, in the interval between Jesus’ first and second coming, God will pour out His Spirit on “all flesh” (2:17). The term “all flesh” refers to everybody who calls on the name of the Lord. “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy.” The word “prophesy” means to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed.

“Your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams.” Young and old alike will be so filled with the Spirit of God that they catch visions of God during the daytime and dream of Him at night.

“Even upon my servants, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy” (18). The Holy Spirit does not discriminate on the basis of age, gender or social status.

The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament was given to specific people—prophets, priests and kings—to accomplish God’s mission. But in the New Testament dispensation, the Spirit is distributed to every disciple—men and women, young and old, master and slave alike.

The church often segregates people by age and life stage with good intentions. People of a certain age and life stage have obvious affinity for each other. But there are huge dividends when young and old are paired together. Psalm 78 declares that one gener-

ation will declare God’s work to another. How can one generation declare God’s work to another generation if we are segregated from each other?

The phrase “sons and daughters shall prophesy” seems especially relevant to confirmation today. The Bible is replete with examples of God calling teenagers into his service. Jeremiah was 17 when God called him to become a prophet. Mary was 15 or 16 when the angel Gabriel announced that she would give birth and raise the Messiah. According to the 1st century historian Josephus, Samuel was 12 when God spoke to him.

The excuse, “I’m too young to serve God,” doesn’t pass muster with God. We’re never too young or too old to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. We’re never too young or old to be of service to God.

I’m taking a sabbatical this summer to write and take a ministry break. My vocation requires a significant investment of time on evenings and weekends. This sabbatical will normalize my life for once. Our church has a policy that ministers are eligible for a sabbatical after seven years of service. I’m taking my first sabbatical after 30 years. The staff has been encouraging me to take a sabbatical. Pete, if you don’t take a sabbatical, we’ll never be able to take one.

With such a capable pastoral staff, it’s not hard to step aside this summer. God has assembled an awesome pastoral team. Stan has served as a senior pastor for a comparable church in Pittsburgh. He’s

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bringing renewal to churches across our country through the ministry of Vital Church Institute. Glenda and David are two of the most Spirit-filled people I have ever met. Every instinct in them is first Christ-centered, then program-driven. Chris, our parish associate, is, among other things, a gifted teacher. I could go on to talk about our gifted staff, whether it be preschool, children, youth, young adult, music, evangelism, outreach or administration. The staff with which I work is truly awesome!

My absence for some of you this summer is no big deal. Life will go on as before. But let me speak to some of you more closely tied to me, who might be tempted to say, 'Hey, if Pete's gone this summer, perhaps I'll be gone as well.'

Don't you dare! Don't make your presence or absence on account of me. Really, now, it's not about me, it's about God. If you stop coming on account of me, you will validate that this ministry is personality-driven rather than Spirit-driven.

We are distributing today a daily devotional for use this summer called Acts of a Disciple: From the Pew to the World. If you would like this devotional emailed to you daily, we can arrange for it. We can even twitter it to you. This 98-day devotional will track with our summer sermon series on Acts. Why 98 days? The answer is rather simple. There are 98 days between June 1 and Labor Day. We want to discover how God transforms a fledgling group of

disciples into a dynamic, Spirit-filled community who literally turns their world upside down.

We are asking you this summer to covenant to pray daily and study diligently so that we might become God's transformed community. As part of this covenant, we are asking you to worship weekly, whether you are in town or on vacation. We urge you to share this journey with a small group or prayer partner(s). Look for opportunities this summer to serve creatively, give generously and witness boldly. We will culminate on Labor Day Sunday, in worship at one hour in this sanctuary and the hall simultaneously; then be sent into Northern Virginia in a mission of compassion and service.

How can I roll Confirmation, Pentecost and my sabbatical into a single theme? I invite you to turn to a book that may be unfamiliar to you—the Old Testament book of Numbers. In Numbers 11, people are complaining to Moses there is only one item on the menu during their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness—manna (4-9). They pine for the good old days in Egypt when they had plenty of fish and chips. Moses is sick and tired of their incessant whining, so he unloads on God with a series of rhetorical questions. "Why have you laid the burden of all these people on me?" (11). "Did I conceive these people?" (12). "Where am I to get meat to give to all these people?" (13).

Moses reaches the breaking point when he declares, "I can't carry these people all by myself; they're too heavy for me. If you're going to

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treat me like this, go ahead and kill me. Put me out of my misery” (14-15). That’s what Moses says! You can read the text for yourself. It’s full of pathos and it’s hilarious!

God’s remedy is to call 70 elders together to the tent of meeting. The same Spirit that has been given to Moses will now be placed on them as well (17). Two elders, Eldad and Medad, are late in showing up to the meeting (26). So, while 68 elders receive the Spirit in Moses’ presence, these two receive the Spirit apart from Moses in the company of the people.

When word reaches Moses that two elders are prophesying in an unauthorized manner, Joshua, Moses’ assistant, reacts indignantly: “Moses, stop them!” (28). Moses isn’t the least bit concerned that the Spirit isn’t channeled through him. “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!” (29).

The day when all God’s people would become prophets that the prophet Joel predicted comes to pass in Acts. I long for the day when all God’s people will become prophets, when sons and daughters will prophesy, young and old will dream dreams and share visions, when all God’s people become prophets. Would that all the people at VPC would become so filled and saturated with the Spirit that they would become bold witnesses for Jesus Christ.

VPC is not dependent on its senior pastor or its teaching pastor or its associate pastors. It is not dependent on its competent staff or even reliant on its talented and committed congregation. It is dependent on the Spirit.

