

Numbers 11:24-30, Acts 2:1-13
“When the Holy Spirit surrounds us”

A couple of weeks ago I was out in Washington State on Whidbey Island where my oldest daughter is getting married in about a month and there was a lot of work to do to get the yard ready for where she will be having the wedding. There was a lot of hedges that needed trimmed, and things moved and the biggest job that I undertook was this massive driveway in front of the house that had years and years of moss stuck to it and since it was a hard gravel driveway power washing was not an option.

So you do the next best thing, you get bleach, mix it with water, and spray it on there and then you use a hose about an inch away from the driveway and wash it off with a little bit of force, but not too much. They had this hand pump sprayer so I mixed water and bleach but that sprayer really didn't get too much of the bleach and water on the moss. So I found this industrial backpack sprayer that had a hand pump that shot out a stream of water and bleach. I put it on my back and for about 3 hours I mixed water and chlorine, put it on my back, pumped away and sprayed that driveway like there was no tomorrow. I was I was feeling so free and good that I had finally figured out a solution.

After about four hours I noticed that my clothes that I was wearing were quite wet because the backpack contraption that I was wearing was leaking like crazy and when I went in to take a shower I noticed that I had a chemical burn mark on my back side, about this big and boy when the water hit it, it sure hurt like crazy. It is all scabbed over now, the job got done, but that sense of freedom and accomplishment was somewhat tempered by the chemical burn on my butt. I thought I'd share that with you.

There are so many ways to do church together and to be a church together. Presbyterians like to do things decently and in order, but sometimes that freedom that you need to allow the presence of God to wash over all the people in the presence of the Holy Spirit, well, sometimes that freedom burns, and rubs up against the order that some feel is needed. But without a doubt what we see in Scripture is God saying that He is doing a new thing, and that creativity which is needed to introduce the kingdom of God to people, to actually touch people where they are in life, is bottled up and not allowed to be shared because of the fear of being burned, of things falling into chaos, of disorder being the order of the day.

It is not unusual for the Holy Spirit to break into a community to pave the way for God's deeds of power and the people present either do not understand what is happening and so shut it

down, or try to quench it themselves. We see in I Thessalonians 5:19 the Apostle Paul encourages the family of God to not quench the Spirit as they are part of a community that is growing and looking to bring others into their fold.

Both of our Scriptures today address this sense of the Holy Spirit let loose in a way that causes confusion and chaos for many around the scene, and God simply saying that this is His way, don't get in the way of it. The Christian church has often gotten in the way of God's Holy Spirit and tried to retain it for itself, to control it, and to try to use it for purposes that are safer and less risky. But our goal has to be to carry out God's desire that all people would be covered with His presence in the Holy Spirit so that His deeds of power can be realized.

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Turn with me if you would to the Scripture in Numbers. It is one of those Scriptures that you know that you have read at some time, but then when you look at it again you realize how perfect it is for the Day of Pentecost that we are celebrating today. So this concept of the Holy Spirit falling upon the family of God in a setting where they are all gathered is not unique to Acts, to this reading that we just read. We see it here in Numbers, but in a very different way, in a way that was somewhat predictable, but even in that order and predictability it gets somewhat out of hand according to those who wanted things done decently and in order.

The background is that in this same chapter at the beginning you have the people of Israel who are complaining to Moses because they have had no meat since they left Egypt, only this manna that has fallen from heaven. Look at vs.13 and we see Moses then complaining to God, as the people complained to him, as they said: Give us meat to eat!

God takes this as a challenge and he says to Moses in vs.23: "Is the Lord's power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not." So this is why the elders are gathered so that they can see the power of God and then experience the amazing deeds of God's power themselves personally. He calls the elders together, the Holy Spirit descends upon these elders in the form of a cloud in vs. 25 they receive the Holy Spirit and they begin to prophecy. That could have ended the story with then in the next verses God sends the quails so what the people asked for they got, as well as the power of the Holy Spirit.

But there were two elders who were not with the 70 who were gathered by the tent, they were in the camp with the others, with the hundreds of thousands of others, but they also received the Holy Spirit even though they were not there and they began prophesying. Someone

runs back and tells Moses, Joshua, who is the next in line hears about it and commands Moses: Tell them to stop. That is not what should be happening. Do you hear his panic in vs.28. Stop them!

Moses looks at Joshua, maybe puts his hand on this shoulder, and says to him: Oh how I wish that every single person in that camp, from the child to the mother to the leper to the invalid to the foreigner, oh how I wish that everyone would have the Spirit of God put upon them. This is the story of Pentecost, Moses' wish and desire, which we know is God's wish and desire for his people, is that the Holy Spirit, the power of God which then results in the God's deeds of power, would descend upon us all. I have good news for all of us this Sunday morning. It has already happened. Pentecost is called the birthday of the church because it is on the day of Pentecost that the Holy Spirit descended and rested upon the family of God which is called the church, forever.

Joshua panicked because he wanted things to happen as the way that it was laid out. The 70 would be by the tent, they would receive the Holy Spirit, then the event would be over, explainable, controllable, and we can move on with what comes next. What actually happened was risky and scary and not at all predictable. That's not what I signed up for when I agreed to lead the Israelites once Moses is out of the picture. The Holy Spirit often works out of order, and we don't like it, it is scary for us, we try to explain it and control it.

The story of Our Table is an example of how the Holy Spirit has worked and continues to work in a way that is out of order and thrilling and exciting all at once. It stated when Walter was an elder in this church and in consultation with the denomination and with those who were planting these New Worshipping Communities we came up with a solution on how Walter would be able to serve communion at the meals which is an integral part of the ministry. As a session we would provide the permission for him to serve communion for Our Table, which is not a Presbyterian thing to do because the Presbytery was not involved in any way, just the denomination.

We did that, and of course the Presbytery caught wind of it and so the leader team of the Presbytery made the decision to ratify the permission that this Session gave to Walter to conduct communion and that has carried on yearly. Joshua comes running to Moses in the midst of the powerful movement of the Holy Spirit and it scares him and it is out of control and he tells Moses to fix it. Moses says, you can't fix the Holy Spirit. Our Table allows the Holy Spirit to

move in a way that is unpredictable and without seeming order and we find a way in which to fix it so that it fits into our government structure and order, so that it makes sense to us. We need some way to bring the power of God into our understanding, otherwise we would most probably quench it.

Paul says in I Thessalonians 5:19, do not quench the Spirit. We have a history in the institutional church of doing just that so that we can understand it, manage it, control it. We see that happen in our Acts Scripture, the only explanation the people of God had, because these were devout Jews who were gathered, was that the disciples were drunk. That was the only explanation because they had never seen anything like this before.

Let's talk about that second Scripture. We find the family of God all gathered together in one place according to vs.1. We do use that word family freely around here don't we? Sometimes people don't like to use that word because they only have had the experience of a family that is dysfunctional and not able to manage being together. But others of us know that God's family is actually family because it is always reaching out, and not looking inward or forming cliques, and never closes in on itself. In our lives maybe we have only experienced dysfunctional families so that when someone calls the church a family we automatically resort to the negative, the dysfunctional. But that's our problem not God's design. God wants a family, God wants His church to feel like a family.

Scripture is replete with examples of where God describes his people, his church as a family. Look at Galatians 6:10 where we read about the family of faith. Look at I Timothy 3:5 where we read about the family of God. Look at Romans 16:1 and I Corinthians 1:10, and Hebrews 2:11 where we read about believers who are brothers and sister. Jesus asks the question, who is my family? Those who do my will. We are God's family and the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost gave this family, this First Presbyterian Church of Strasburg family, the power of the Holy Spirit to do God's amazing deeds.

When God's family is gathered, the unpredictable and the powerful can happen. This year we have been experience the excitement of the presence of the Holy Spirit and it has translated into increased attendance. We are over 10% increase in attendance from last year. We have a second wave of young families with itty bitty children attending, with more on the way. Even in the face of the almost insurmountable wave of death that this congregation has been

going through, there is still growth and it is in that generation of 20 somethings and early thirties. That means that in 5 years this church is going to look very different than it does today.

The temptation is to panic because things might seem out of order. Dedications at a Presbyterian Church? That's not right. Elders serving communion to hundreds and feeding them on the same evening? In the words of Joshua, stop them! This is what healthy families do. They look for opportunities to serve outside of their walls. This is normal for a healthy family, it is not unusual or something unique that we are doing. This is what healthy churches ought to do because they have the Holy Spirit poured out upon them as they gather as a family. May God bless us and keep us as we continue to live into the joy that Christ has given us as the family of God and that is available for all people. Amen.