

Pastor's Message – Pentecost, 2024
Acts 2:1-21

Picture a rocket on a launch pad. A clear blue sky. The white shell of the spacecraft, gleaming in the sun. Five ... four ... three ... two ... one ... blast-off!

A thrilling moment.

Except when the rocket experiences a failure to launch.

28 years ago, on June 4, 1996, a cluster of four spacecraft were launched on the maiden flight of a rocket called Ariane 5. Unfortunately, the rocket flew off course just 37 seconds after launch. Disintegration began, and then its flight termination system caused it to self-destruct. Ka-boom! The four spacecraft were lost -- no people were aboard, fortunately -- when the rocket failed to achieve orbit.

The problem? An error in the software design. It became one of the most expensive software bugs in history, resulting in a loss of more than \$370 million. Since that time, the Ariane 5 has become one of the most reliable of rockets, with more than 115 flights. Unfortunately, there have been five failures in which the rocket exploded or failed to launch.

Sometimes Churches also suffer failures to launch syndrome or sometimes don't always make it into orbit. Pentecost was not one of those times. The infant church did get off the ground. The power of the Holy Spirit was present. Full, complete countdown and launch.

But sometimes, the local churches have problems getting off the launch pad and making it into orbit. Why is that? What do we need to get off the launch pad and get our ministries and our church life into orbit?

Last week we heard in our Bible reading from the Book of Acts that there were 120 believers who had gathered. The church did not start with one individual and did not get off the ground – alone. We benefit from numbers, just as the first apostles did. We need to be in community with one another if our faith and Christian commitment is going to grow. This means we put a focus on gathering for worship and Bible study, and on working together in ministry and mission.

The first mention of the Greek word *ekklesia* in the Bible is found in the gospel of Matthew, and it is translated “church” (16:18). What the word literally means is “gathering,” and it comes from the ancient Greek assembly of citizens in a city-state. The word appears again in Acts, when “Barnabas and Saul met with the church” — the *ekklesia* — in Antioch. It was in this city that the disciples were first called “Christians” (11:26).

We need to gather in numbers to be the church. Jesus is with us when we are together in community, just as he promised us in Matthew, saying, “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (18:20). Assembling for community worship and all the activities that give life and meaning to the church

gives us the most inspiration, insight, and guidance. When we stop taking part, our faith tends to cool off.

You may have noticed that people tend to sit in the same spot in the nave, i.e., as I mentioned last week, the place where the people sit. That may not be a bad thing. However. People can sit side-by-side or in the same room but be light-years apart. It happens regularly. Folks share houses, airplanes, buses, movie theaters, and even church buildings, but chasms divide their hearts and minds.

When Acts tells us that the disciples were "all together in one place" it refers to more than physical togetherness. It means that they were emotionally and spiritually in sync. They proved it by the mighty things they later did for God. "Together" people do astonishing things. It is by being together and working together that the church does its work.

I think that we can use the church "seating chart" to our advantage and become a closer and more successful church. Most/many of you probably sit in the same spots Sunday after Sunday, year after year. Have you ever paid attention to the folks who sit around you? We will have a new Church Directory coming out soon which will make this easier. Start noticing who sits around you and, every Sunday, if one of the people from your section is missing, call them or contact them. Find out why. Are they okay? Tell them you missed them. Build connections. They may need something that you can help with. Pray for them by name and let them know that you prayed for them. That will strengthen the Church and bring them closer to God and the Church.

On that first Pentecost, the church was born and is still working in powerful ways around the world. What brought the disciples together, making them such a powerful force? They experienced tongues as of fire over their heads and heard the sound of a powerful wind. And things began to happen. Wind has power.

You may remember a song from Lerner and Lowe's 1951 California Gold Rush musical, "Paint Your Wagon,"

Away out here they got a name
For rain and wind and fire
The rain is Tess, the fire Joe,
And they call the wind Maria ...
Maria blows the stars around
And sends the clouds a'flyin'

The lovelorn character singing the song is so overcome by memories of his lost love that the wind's plaintive song awakens the grief in his heart:

"They Call the Wind Maria" — which took on a life of its own as a popular hit — was especially popular among G.I.s serving far from home during the Korean War. Lerner and Lowe were inspired to write the song by a 1941 novel, *Storm*, by George Rippey Stewart, whose protagonist is named Maria (also with the distinctive pronunciation, mah-RYE-a). Stewart described why: "The soft Spanish

pronunciation is fine for some heroines, but our Maria here is too big for any man to embrace and much too boisterous.”

U.S. military meteorologists — also inspired by the Maria character in Stewart’s novel — began at that time to designate Pacific storms by women’s names, a practice that would later be extended to North Atlantic storms as well.

We all know the power of strong winds - hurricanes, tornadoes, cyclones, derecho – all are powerful and can change the landscape, destroying houses and buildings, uprooting trees, causing all sorts of damage. Such strong winds make change. Trying to stand or move against a strong wind can be difficult or impossible. I speak from experience. Many of you know that I use my bicycle for transportation and strong wind can be challenging. But only in one direction.

God sends the Holy Spirit to lead us and guide us in God’s direction. God expects us to be united with him in ministry, in loving others as he loves us. In John 17:20-23, Jesus said “I ask ... that they may all be one. ... that they may be one, as we are one, ... completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me.” Then, the apostle Paul chimed in, “Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (1 Corinthians 1:10).

But how can we possibly create unity about the various values, theologies, rituals, ideals, causes, institutional agendas, and ideological *isms* that we champion, protest, and expostulate on social media? *There is a unity that is possible.* It focuses not on dogmas, rituals, causes or institutions. It is a unity we Christians have about attitudes and behavior. We have faith, we cling to hope, and we love one another. 1 Corinthians 13 reminds us that we can disagree; but we cannot be disagreeable; that we can be gifted and talented, but absent love. We can put one hundred Christians in a room together and they may not agree on whether to use debts, trespasses, or sins in the Lord’s Prayer, but they will definitely treat one another with respect, kindness, gentleness, patience, and love. That sort of unity is possible.

It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that the Church becomes the Church. The Spirit is a creative force in our lives, just as the wind of God was a creative power in the making of the heavens and the earth. In Acts, the Spirit creates the Christian community, which is why Pentecost is sometimes called the “birthday” of the church.

Notice that God’s Spirit is poured out on a collection of believers. “The Holy Spirit is not a ‘personal’ gift from God that each believer privatizes,” says biblical professor Robert Wall. The fact that the Spirit appeared to a group is “the distinguishing mark of a *people* belonging to God.”

We tend to have an individualistic view of faith in the United States, and many people talk about having a personal relationship with Jesus. There is nothing wrong with that, everyone must make a decision to follow Jesus as a disciple and live out their faith, but what is created by the Spirit on Pentecost is a distinctive and powerful

community faith. It is a faith that moves mountains and changes individual people and changes the world.

On Pentecost Sunday, we celebrate the transforming nature of God's spirit at work in the early Christian community, in creation, through the prophets, then, today, always, and everywhere! Our Bible reading from Acts today invites us to experience the awe and wonder of living in the presence of God's Holy Spirit.

My hope and prayer is that as you experience the Bible reading for today, that you might imagine the "woosh!" of renewal and new life for your self and for your church, and the crackle of excitement that those first followers experienced on the day of Pentecost when the Spirit became so powerfully and publicly present to them and all those around them and that same excitement might permeate your life and the life of this church.

I didn't talk about fire at all – which was one of the elements of that first Pentecost. The thing about fire is that it can be both constructive and destructive. I saw a video recently about controlled burn recently and I've seen the results of a controlled burn in my lifetime. The idea is that if you intentionally burn a particular area of forest or grassland then the danger of uncontrolled wildfire is diminished because the dry, dead underbrush is burned away. In addition, the newer healthy growth that emerges from the burn will enrich the whole area.

I suppose one could say that the fire provided by the Holy Spirit was a constructive fire, designed to build the emerging church. I wonder what would happen if the Spirit conducted a prescribed burn on today's church? What is our dry, dead underbrush? What would be consumed by the Spirit's fire, and what would new growth look like?

The Dream Team has had some excellent meetings, talking about direction for the Church in the light of a new Mission Statement and, before long, you all will be completing a survey asking how you hear and see God's Holy Spirit creating a new Pentecost here. How is God inspiring us to build a Church that is growing, healthy, and viable for the next 5, 10, 50, 180 years.

The Church has always been characterized by *hope*. The hope of the church is grounded in the faithfulness of God. Therefore, as Paul notes, we have hope: "Character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:4-5).

May this Pentecost Sunday and every Sunday be a moment when the wind of the Holy Spirit moves among us, and the fire of God warms our hearts to fuel this day and the future. May the generations yet to come echo Paul's words, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:3-5).