

## **“What Does This Mean?” Acts 2:1-21**

It's hard to know the person when you aren't even sure of the person's name. Our names matter. So when someone calls me "Curt" for example, like a colleague in ministry has been doing for nearly twenty years now (and who I am simply too embarrassed to correct again) I usually say my name is Kirk (as in Captain Kirk). The same can be said of the "Holy Spirit". Although the "Third Person of the Trinity" as those of us within the church like to say (which leaves far more shaking their heads in confusion than nodding in agreement) the Holy Spirit is as "airy" as the "name" itself. For what is "holy" and don't "spirits" have more to do with fantasy than reality? So maybe it's worthwhile to see the title Jesus uses for the Holy Spirit in John's Gospel where he uses, "Paraclete" when referring to the "other" that He would send after He was gone. The name "Paraclete" is sometimes translated "Advocate" and most often "Comforter" which sounds reasonable when you back track just little in the Biblical narrative.

When Jesus finally became "blunt" with his disciples that all those prophecies that spoke about His arrest, punishment and death were in fact going to happen, the disciples were taken aback. The disciples had been on this roller coaster ride with this itinerant preacher for three years now. They had, if you remember, left everything (job, family, security and safety) when Jesus said "Follow me" and they immediately followed. Sure, anything can sound like an adventure at first. "Hey Ian, why don't we quit our jobs and climb Mt Everest?" Now if that was both Ian and my dream and our jobs were nearly killing us then the thought might be appealing at first. I might even be able to convince Ian to go with me to buy a new "Northface™" jacket, book a ticket to Nepal and begin our training. But begin the trek up the mountain and continue, after we hit our first snow storm, is quite another step. So having these disciples skip a few meals, miss a kid's highschool graduation or sleep another night outside in the rain you would think at least one of the twelve might say to Jesus, "Thanks for the memories but I'm going home." But they stayed. They all stayed. They all stuck it out till the end - even though they didn't know it was the end.

And even though it was really Jesus mouthing the words, "Thanks for the memories" the disciples still didn't quite understand. But then, like a light bulb being turned on, the reality began to sink in. Jesus was actually going to leave them. They would actually be on their own, well not "actually" for Jesus told them He would send another. He would send the Paraclete. You can see why the name matters then, in this case, especially. They would need a Comforter. If you've lost someone close to you then you know firsthand of what I speak. You needed a comforter. And not just a small "c" comforter but a big "C" Comforter. And this is who Jesus was sending. But it's also important to go

back even further, “way back” (as the Friendly Giant would say) to the beginning, the very beginning. Because the Holy Spirit wasn’t “birthed” in the Upper Room as I read to you just a few minutes ago. No, Father and Son were present at the beginning along with the Holy Spirit “moving over the waters” when God was speaking everything into being. (Gen 1:3) So when Jesus’ promise of sending “Another” came to fruition, following His death, and the disciples were hiding in the same spot where Jesus celebrated the “Last Communion,” (fearing they could be arrested and next to be crucified) this was not the Holy Spirit’s first “show” but a “new series,” at least in t.v. lingo. Maybe this appearance was different than all those other times, but it was still the same Paraclete. Now I don’t claim to understand what transpired that day in the Upper Room. And some say I will never fully understand because I am not Pentecostal – a denomination arising from the experience of what happened over two thousand years ago.

It was the Day of Pentecost, one of the three Holiest Days in the life of the Jews – 50 Days (Pente) following the Holiest of Days: Passover, which reminded Israel of the Old Testament story of the 10 Plagues when the Hebrews avoided the tenth and final plague of the death of the firstborn because they followed God’s instructions to put lamb’s blood on their doorposts so that the Angel of Death would “pass over” them and they would be safe. But what differed from every other Pentecost was the “charisma” or gifts that came with that particular Pentecost that turned these frightened followers into fearless disciples. Now we’re not sure if it was the violent winds, the divided tongues, the fire, or the speaking in different languages that brought about the transformation in those who had gathered. But most say it was the Spirit Herself who introduced the first “charismatic Christians” who radically birthed the church. I don’t understand what happened that day but one thing I must agree with writer, professor and pastor David Lose is that this Paraclete was misnamed “because everywhere I look in this familiar Pentecost text the Holy Spirit isn’t comforting anyone or anything but instead is shaking things up”. (David Lose) So maybe just a little word or name analysis might help. “Paraclete” is a compound Greek word that literally means “to come alongside another.” In this sense, the Paraclete can be an advocate – to come along side to defend and counsel – or comforter – to come along side to provide comfort and encouragement. But the one who comes along side might also do so to strengthen you for work, or to muster your courage, or to prompt or even provoke you to action. Which is why I think the Paraclete as the one who comes along side of us to encourage and equip us for the task of ministry is such a perfect name for the Holy Spirit.” (Lose) There was, and still is a lot of confusion about what happened that day. In fact, maybe the one question posed by onlookers that day is best. “What does this mean?” (Acts 2:12) The crowd, we are told was “amazed” at what they saw. Who wouldn’t be? But this is not the joy of a child seeing a magic trick. The

onlookers sentiment was closer to bewilderment; they are flummoxed by all of the signs and (wonders). Some, of course, mock the happenings as a scene caused by people drunk on new wine (2:13). So Luke uses their question “What does this mean?” to launch into Peter’s speech. It’s a great question and not just for the original audience but for us today. What does this event mean? Is it simply a onetime fantastic occurrence, never to be repeated? Is it something that we somehow need to recapture for that is what is missing in an age when the church seems to be declining? David Lose continues, “As far as I can tell, nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus command us to go out and build churches, take care of old buildings, and devote yourself to crumbling institutions. No, Jesus says “go and make disciples” and “when you care for the least of these you are caring for me” and “love one another as I have loved you.” And this kind of work is inherently disruptive, difficult, and at times even dangerous. And so Jesus sends the Paraclete, the one who comes along side us to encourage, equip, strengthen, provoke and, yes, at times to comfort us so that we can get out there and do it all again. So perhaps this Pentecost, we might substitute the traditional petition, “Come, Holy Spirit,” with one more suited to the name we’ve discussed, “Come alongside, Holy Spirit!” (David Lose) And maybe then we begin to understand what this event means for us today.

I’m not sure if the name Sara Miles means anything to you. She was a former chef, secular intellectual, skeptic, and journalist. Notice, I say “was.” In a broadcast from the CBC show “Tapestry” she told host Sarah Hynes about her unexpected--and inconvenient--conversion to Christianity when she entered a church on impulse in San Francisco one Sunday. You see, Miles was raised as an atheist and she was happily living an "enthusiastically secular life" as a restaurant cook and journalist, indifferent to religion at best. As she says in the Prologue to her book, *Take This Bread*, "I was certainly not interested in becoming a Christian.... Or, as I thought of it rather less politely, a religious nut." But as she entered the doors of St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco on a whim, she ate a piece of bread and took a sip of wine and found herself radically transformed.... At the age of 46 this was her first communion and it changed everything." (Source: Rev. Dr. Scott Kenefake) Now there is still a lot of transforming that needs to happen in her life just as it does in my life but her “conversion” story is a lesson about what happened in the Upper Room which meant something to Sara. Now I could share this kind of story with you for many reasons but maybe none more important than to show that the God we serve is still a God of transformation – a God who can change a life in the most wonderful of ways. And if God can encounter ordinary people like Sara Miles then maybe God can do unexpected things in my life as well to give our lives “meaning”. For there is something in this story of Sara Miles that I believe resonates with the story of Acts chapter 2. I would dare say it might even help answer the question of those onlookers of “What does this mean?” Let’s

first start with Sara. “What was the unexpected experience of Sara Miles, in San Francisco, the enthusiastic atheist, who had no intention of becoming a follower of Jesus, until she met him, as a living reality, in the bread and wine of the Eucharist? How has this encounter of the Spirit changed her life? Well for Sara she started a food pantry and gave away literally tons of fruit and vegetables and cereal around the same altar where she first received communion. She then organized new pantries all over the city to provide hundreds of hungry families with free groceries each week. Without committees or meetings or even an official telephone number, she recruited scores of volunteers and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars. The living Spirit of Christ, described in scripture by the unpredictable, uncontrollable symbols of wind, fire, and breath, radically transformed Sara Miles' life--and her community. When the spirit is active and present, it's not just about, "me," but about, "we," says Sara. It's about the creation of a new kind of inclusive, welcoming, community based on love. But Sara Miles also discovered that her newly transformed life wasn't necessarily going to be easy. She had to trudge in the rain through housing projects, sit on the curb wiping the runny nose of a psychotic man, take the firing pin out of a battered woman's .357 Magnum, then stick the gun in a cookie tin in the trunk of her car, struggle with her atheist family, and doubting friends. She also had to learn about the great American scandal of the politics of food, the economy of hunger, and the rules of money,” as Scott Kenefake writes. Even Miles herself writes, "I know that there are a lot of Christians who don't think I ought to be allowed in the club. Luckily, Christianity is not a club."

So maybe David Lose is right. “The Spirit of God does not come to bring us comfort but to shake the church out of our comfort”. What does the Spirit's arrival mean? “The Spirit brings change! Some of it welcome, some not, but always directed to the neighbor in need. As Felten and Proctor-Murphy points out: Christianity is not about things we should or shouldn't do, or about just being nice. It's reveling in the beauty of creation, about taking part in the wonderment of it all by living, loving, and being. It's about embracing the pain and suffering of the world and transforming it into new life. It's about harnessing the creative Spirit that is so much a part of what it means to be human.” (Kenefake) At least that's what it meant to the early who took not just the message but lived out the message to the world, in the power of the Holy Spirit. And we are asked to do the same here as we “re-write the story of our community together and with the Paraclete beside. Let us pray...