

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson, associate minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, May 27, 2012, Pentecost Sunday, dedicated to all who take the risk to be amazed.

“Amazed and Perplexed”

Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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On the day of Pentecost the people were gathered from across the regions. Many scholars have formulated who they were and why they gathered, but there is no one single explanation for the broad diversity of people gathered that day. Some have wanted to think of the day of Pentecost as the reversal of Babel, when the people were divided by different languages, but it doesn't match. Instead, on Pentecost the people of different languages understood each other in spite of the different languages they spoke.

On the earlier days of Pentecost, 50 days after the Passover, the people were gathered to celebrate an ancient event – a time of celebrating the sealing of the Old Covenant on Mount Sinai. This time the people gathered from north and south, east and west to receive another amazing gift from God.

This time, God was bringing forth the gift of the Spirit. This time the Holy Spirit was given to them in an amazing pyrotechnic display, just as it had once been promised by the Prophet Joel and proclaimed by the Psalmist! No wonder the people were amazed and astonished!

Suddenly, there were winds and flames and roaring sounds on Pentecost, but it's possible that none of that was as miraculous as this – people busy with their daily lives as well as their religious duties actually stopped long enough to notice that something strange was going on. Unfortunately, some only stayed amazed long enough to come up with a lame excuse the heckler hollers out: “Are they drunk already?” Peter tried to set the record straight. But at least for a moment, they had taken it all in and noticed.

Does it ever surprise you how much happens in our life that goes unnoticed, how quickly we are un-amazed by the amazing? Have you ever found a plant in your yard that you swear you have never seen before? What about something along your usual drive to work or to town that suddenly catches your eye, a new building or road and you begin to wonder when it was built and why? And the deer, the whitetails around here are everywhere. Every time I notice one unexpectedly right next to the road, it reminds me of how many more I must cruise past every day, those standing at the edges, but I just never noticed. We are ready to be shocked, but so rarely, amazed.

Instead, we get busy. We focus on the next thing. We put on our Bluetooth or headphones or plop a screen in front of our face, and voila – oblivion sets in. The problem isn't that we don't notice everything; the real issue is that we get so busy that we even forget how to be open to being amazed.

There is one universal exception though – the children. If you really want to recover the gift of amazement, spend some time with a child. Go outside and take a walk along the timberline or through the city park. Move at their pace and get down at their level when they stoop down to reach for a worm, or a bug, or a funny-shaped stick. In an instant, you will be amazed and astonished!

The story in Acts includes both the phrase amazed and astonished, and then a little later, the phrase amazed and perplexed. When it comes to a little child finding something in nature, you know what comes next—the barrage of perplexing questions: “Grandma, why did God forget to put legs on worms?”

How come this stick fell off that tree? Where do frogs come from? How come Grandpa is so grouchy until he gets a nap?”

In the story of the Pentecost, the perplexing “whats” “hows” and “whys” all can be answered in the same way. It happened because the Holy Spirit came over them. Sure, you can discuss and discuss the phenomenon that happened that day, but one thing is certain—the outcome of what happened is that the world changed. The church of Jesus Christ was blessed. Her job description was spelled out in tongues of flames, and the people were empowered.

As a child grows, his or her “job description” – what he or she is going to become in the world – slowly and steadily appears. From just a few months old, research tells us, for instance, some children already begin to move toward boldness, others caution. Somewhere around school age, or even younger, interests and gifts emerge. I know a 6-year-old girl who plays T-ball with the focus of a 19-year-old All-American collegiate softball first baseman. She leads off of the bag and puts her body exactly where it needs to be to stop the run and get the out – and she is just one example among a million others. A child’s job description grows from their very first day and so it is with the “job description” of the church since Pentecost.

Today, the church’s job description is to trust the Spirit with our minds, hearts and ears; trust the Spirit as she directs us through scripture and guides our understanding; trust the Spirit to protect our hearts when those we encounter are broken-hearted themselves; trust the Spirit with our ears . . . make listening more important than talking; forgiving more important than winning; trust the Spirit to grant us compassion with and for others instead of power over them.

God's gift of the Spirit allows us to see things together we did not see as individuals alone. The Spirit gives us the courage to respond as one – even though we are many. It affords the way for us to be amazed by what the Spirit does when she brings people together in the name of Jesus Christ. And if we let it – to be the church today, all these years after the blessed community received the gift of the Spirit – it is truly a surprising gift and experience.

Being astounded is part of our job description as the church, so why is it so hard? Why are we so tied up in knots of greed and fear? Why do we cherish stuff instead of cherishing each other? When you get right down to it the love of stuff and the fear of losing stuff is just not that amazing. The one with the most toys really does not win in the end. All that detritus weighs us down and clutters our minds as well as our barns; it plugs up our heart and it stops up our ears. It makes us die younger and it keeps us from hearing what others have to say. We spend so much precious time gathering it, and plotting ways to win more.

The good news of the Holy Spirit is that astonishing times will empower us when we let it all go, slow down a little; breathe in the breath of God; listen to the stories of the Bible or of someone with a broken heart; make a little time to share laughter and a meal with someone in need, maybe even sing a couple of songs together.

The world relies on greed and fear to motivate, but the amazing imagination of God is much more inspiring. When the Spirit called the Church into being on that new day of Pentecost, the people were brought together in faith and trust. From that day forward we were equipped with the capacity to be open and to understand each other Christ's foretelling: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8) And so we are gifted to become the astonishing church in conversation with the world, yet we let the gift be still. God gives us fresh challenges in every time and place. Are you amazed God trusts us or would a touch of amazement practice help?

I was going to offer you my Top Ten List of Amazing Things, but decided that was selfish. Instead I offer you a top ten list with four blank spaces for you to fill in during your drive or walk home today, or over the dinner table. You can think of mine as a jumpstart.

1. Do you remember how George Bush Sr. celebrated his 80th birthday? He jumped out of an airplane, with a parachute.
2. Consider my 85-year-old friend who took a cruise to Key West and then went parasailing . . . two years in a row. She is looking forward to next time.
3. Sign up online for a tour of the Honda factory—if those giant machines don't amaze you, I am not sure what will.
4. Go to the Art Museum across the street and see the 1,700-year-old floor from Nod Israel. How did they take it up? How did they get it here?
5. Practice praying in an unfamiliar way; maybe learn the Lord's Prayer in a new language.
6. Trust the Spirit to bring you together with someone surprising – then listen.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

We have a family friend, a veteran of the war in Afghanistan. He now lives in the ethnically diverse neighborhood of Whitehall. Several evenings in a row he and a neighbor he describes as looking “VERY Arabic” passed each other on the street during their midnight walks. Each time they awkwardly sought a way to avoid each other. One night they literally bumped into each other coming around a corner.

The neighbor invited the veteran into his house. They sat and talked until 5 a.m., a time the veteran had been trained to recognize as the time for Islamic prayer. He was sitting on what he thought might be the Arabic neighbor's prayer mat at the time and he tried to politely excuse himself.

The Arabic-looking man smiled and said to the veteran, “Thanks for the respect, neighbor, that's my wife's rug; a family heirloom handed down to us as we fled our former country. And besides, I'm a Methodist? Do you have a church home?” Today they are friends. Today they babysit each other's toddlers.

Let us lay down our fear, our worry and our busyness and take part in the amazing imagination of God. May the glory of the Lord endure forever. Amen.

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