

Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

May 15, 2005

Sermon Text: Acts 2:1-21

A certain preacher, Fred Craddock, tells a funny story about a lecture he was giving. I think it's funny. He was on the West Coast speaking at a seminary there, and just before the lecture, one of the students stood up, and said, "Before you speak a word, I need to know if you are Pentecostal." The room grew silent, and Craddock stood. He looked around for the dean of the seminary, and he couldn't find him. The student continued with his quiz, right in front of everybody, and Craddock was sort of taken aback so he asked, "Do you mean, do I belong to the Pentecostal Church?" The young man said, "No. I mean, are you Pentecostal?" Craddock said, "Are you asking if I am Charismatic?" The student said, "I am asking if you are Pentecostal." Craddock asked, "Do you want to know if I speak in tongues?" He said, "I want to know if you are Pentecostal?" Craddock said, "I don't know what your question is." The student said, "Obviously, you are not Pentecostal." And he left. Are we, Pentecostal? Today is Pentecost. What does this question mean? Let's look and see.

Now Pentecost is an old Jewish holiday. Think of it as exactly like Thanksgiving without the turkey. At Pentecost, faithful Jews from every nation came. They gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the harvest. Jews came from all the corners of the known world, speaking whatever language they spoke, many forgetting their mother tongue of Hebrew. God had a new word for them to hear, but how were they to hear it? The power of the Holy Spirit made it possible for everyone to hear in his own language the good news of Jesus Christ. Tongues on fire, ears aflame, it sort of sounds painful, doesn't it? The miracle of Pentecost is in the hearing, perhaps, more than the speaking. Each heard of God's love, God's forgiveness, and God's eternal hope in Christ in their own language. Now some of you may be asking, you're asking silently to yourselves because we aren't that sort of Pentecostal, to ask it out loud, some are asking, "Jim, do you believe that God can empower people to speak or to hear in other languages?" Well, my answer, in the rabbinic tradition, would be another question. Folks, didn't we just a few minutes ago, affirm that we believe in the resurrection of the dead? Then, yes, I believe God can do a great many things we cannot fathom or at times, even approve of. No one believed God was involved at all when this great cacophony of languages first arose. No, they thought the disciples must be drunk, and accused them of having too much new wine. The best Peter could retort was, "It's only 9 o'clock in the morning! It's far too early to be drunk!" Now, I attended Wofford College, and I understand that argument, but some of you who went to these large, sinful state universities, I don't know about 9 o'clock in the morning being a compelling defense. I'm not sure. Or at Wofford either. No, rather, he said, they were filled with the Holy Spirit. This is what Joel the Prophet foretold many years ago. All through the Old Testament, the Spirit is said to have come upon men and women to give words and power to act as God's agents, and all the prophets were said to be empowered by God's Spirit to do and to say what they did. Joel foretold a day when God's Holy Spirit would be poured out on all flesh. The Spirit is new wine, and it doesn't make you drunk. It puts you in your right mind. It gives you new eyes, new heart, new power, new direction. Now, this idea is very old. It is also found in Ezekiel where it says, "And I will give them one heart and put a new spirit within them. I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, of warmth, a soft heart, that they

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may walk in my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them, and they shall be my people and I will be their God.” Also from Psalm 51, the same idea, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence and take not thy Holy Spirit from me.”

Now in Methodism, we’re sort of fuzzy on the Holy Spirit, and we should not be. If you walk around our amazing new building, almost done, you will see carved in stone, sort of, or at least in brick, the cross and the flame. That flame symbolizes the Holy Spirit and the Spirit’s action at Pentecost, the birth of the church, and the preaching in all languages and to all people, the love and the hope of Christ. Many of you were here for the Ash Wednesday service, and if you had to go somewhere else to buy gas or milk or bread on the way home, and you had that cross on your hand or your forehead in ashes, I know that you felt oddly public about your faith. Well, think of this, our building witnesses 24 hours a day, seven days a week that we know our mission is to teach and to live a cross-centered Gospel, empowered by God’s Holy Spirit. Our founder, John Wesley, said, “The renewal of the soul, after the image of God, can never be wrought except by the power of the Holy Spirit.” That’s God in us, growing us, giving us courage to be different in Christ-like ways, giving us power to tolerate and then to forgive and then to love even our enemies. It also gives us trust that we can live with less, that we can open our hand wider and more generously to the church, and not only the church but to other causes, that we can have growing faith and use our time more to express it, our talents more to express it as well as our treasure. We can extend our invitation to this worship service and to our programs deeper into the community and to different folks than who have ever been here before. We have a name for this process of growing. It is called sanctification, allowing God to have his way with our lives, being set apart, to be useful to God, giving God control, growing and changing and becoming more like Jesus Christ.

I like the story about two caterpillars. They were crawling along, and they looked up, and they saw a beautiful butterfly flying high above them, and one caterpillar elbowed the other, I think caterpillars have elbows, anyway, one caterpillar said to the other, “Hey, look at that. You’d never get me up in one those things.” I know that’s corny, but it’s good. You see, we the church, God’s church, are not empowered by money or by educations or by talents or abilities or committees or officers. We are empowered and led by God, or we have no right to exist.

A few years ago, in the Rose Bowl Parade, a float stalled, and it was on national television, as the Rose Bowl Parade always is, and some mechanics ran out, and they started working and looking for the problem on the float. Finally, somebody had the presence of mind to check the fuel gauge, and that was it. It was out of gas. It gets worse. The crowd realized what was going on, and the sponsor of this particular float was Exxon. Imagine, a flagship float for Exxon, in a national parade, out of gas! Now, imagine also a church with a big, brick flame on the wall with no sense of power from God’s spirit. Didn’t John the Baptist predict, “One mightier than I is coming, and he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” Fire is another interesting symbol. Fire has a way of burning away the chaff. It refines. It galvanizes. The hearts of the disciples were set on fire with a love for Christ and a burning desire to share that love with others. On the day of Pentecost, the disciples

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thrust open the doors, the closed doors they were hiding behind, and they poured out into the streets. A crowd had already gathered there, drawn by the sound of a mighty wind. A sound like the rush of a violent wind filled the room, and these tongues of fire appeared among them, representing the various tongues of languages there, resting on each of the disciples, and that language barrier came down. There may be barriers between us in this community that need to come down. The Holy Spirit rushed in, and like a breath of fresh air, the impossible became possible. We don't yet know what impact the finished construction will have on Main Street or on Greenwood or on the people or programs not yet dreamt of, but when you throw open the doors, and you follow God's lead, big things happen. You know, we are a church filled with professionals, and we bring that mind set into church. We often try too hard to organize and control everything. I went to a spiritual life retreat one time. This actually happened. The leader said, "Now is the time on the schedule where we will be spontaneous and creative. You have 15 minutes. Go." We do that sort of thing. We are considering also – just to throw this out, and I want to hear your feedback – we're considering a non-traditional, more relaxed worship service, probably in the Fellowship Hall, not in here. I'm not sure when this will come about, but we're considering that, and that will be a major new sort of outreach or maybe an inreach. If it does not meet your needs, don't come, but please don't fight it or other new things we might try. The Spirit bulges in our windows. Sometimes it doesn't get in. Maybe because we insist on thinking we are in control. We are not. Power belongs to God. Tomorrow belongs to God. Our very bodies and souls and lives come from God and rightly belong to God. The idea of controlling and scheduling how God works is absurd. It is hubris, the sin of pride. It is the creature telling the creator how things ought to be done. First, the disciples heard an uncontrollable storm of wind, and there was no pretending they had any control. Perhaps it was the breath of God. It's a funny thing. In Hebrew, and I make much of this, but I believe it's a symbol we should be aware of, in Hebrew the word for air is ruah (also ruach, ruwach), the same word for wind, ruah, and for breath and for spirit, all ruah. All one word. Spirit. Breath. Air. Wind. And the same in the New Testament with the Greek word pneuma. God breathes his spirit into us to give life in Genesis and to give new life and new hope at Pentecost.

That brings me to an unexpected point, sort of switching gears, occasionally, you can still find a gas station that has a sign off to the side in red, happy letters, "Free Air." Now, most of the time, you pay \$.50 or \$1.00 now for air, but occasionally, you'll see "Free Air." You used to see it all the time. When I see the "Free Air" sign, I always grin a little bit, and think how that would translate to ancient Hebrew Biblical travelers if they saw it, "Free Ruah." Get your spirit here! Get your life force here! Free air! Yes, I really think that way, and I really think that's funny. Apparently no one else does. Free air! Cross and flame. People have a right to expect God's comfort, God's grace, God's forgiveness and love, right here. By the way, our Helping Hands Fund is empty right now. We've had to turn some folks away. The cross itself speaks to the world a word of hope. Life wins over death. There will always be hope with God, and love wins over hate. Grace and forgiveness win over judgment. Righteousness wins over sin. The flame speaks of new life, new air, fresh breath, new creation. Look at the new creation the disciples became. The disciples were earlier silent and behind closed doors, and then they went out to shout the Gospel throughout the world. The missionary to India, E. Stanley Jones, was fond of

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saying, “Without the Holy Spirit, I am a mess, but with the Holy Spirit, I am a message.” At Pentecost, God entrusted the Gospel to a motley crew so obviously under-qualified that anyone with common sense would know their power must have come from God. Cowardly wimps became spiritual warriors. Pentecost means, and we are called to reflect, God’s offer, God’s second chance to the whole world. Free air. Fresh air. To those who are suffocating or dying with the thought that life is only temporary and cruel and meaningless, it doesn’t have to be. A few years back, I spoke to a close friend of mine from college. He also attended seminary with me a few years, and then dropped out. He left a suicide note with, among other things, a request that I do the eulogy and that I read only one Scripture or passage from Ecclesiastes, which reads “so I hated life because what is done under the sun was grievous to me for always vanity, emptiness, and a striving after wind.” Now he did not do it. My friend is not dead. It is true that striving after wind can just wear you out. We each have our own way of striving after wind, which is not the wind of God’s spirit, after some meaning that gives us hope or some pleasure or some purpose. Some strive after status and money, or wealth or fame, or through indulgence or sex or drugs or thrills of violence or excitement or adrenalin, and too many are tired of striving after wind and giving up hope. They despair of finding peace or purpose. Each of us has felt moments like this, of despair. That may be part of the reason you came this morning. You may have come to be recharged, to be renewed, to be reinflated, you may have had the wind, the spirit, knocked out of you. You are in the right place. God is here. God’s spirit of creation is still at work in the world, and will freely give a second wind to those of us near exhaustion. At Pentecost, God gave his church the power we need to run the race and to finish. We are called to be a new creation, to give fresh air to anyone near exhaustion. We are called to offer purpose and hope through the new Adam of this new creation of God’s new Kingdom through Jesus Christ. He promised a life that is more than temporary, more than cruel and meaningless. He does promise each of us a life that is eternal and hopeful and meaningful and connected to God and to each other. It still may seem cruel at times – and it does. It may be frustrating at times – and it is. It may lack discernable meaning, but through Jesus Christ, we trust that there is meaning, and we can have hope that something of us continues beyond the day that we stop breathing and now we have a purpose to share with others, to be connected with others through God in Christ. We are reminded at Pentecost that the way God uses us is to find those lost and wandering, without purpose, without hope, and saying “this way”, “in here.” There’s been another creation through Jesus Christ. A new spirit of hope is on the earth. Come into his church, and let us show you love, let us show you forgiveness, let us tell you about second chances. Yes, we of the church have Christ’s spirit. It is available to any who will cease striving after wind and emptiness, and enter God’s separate Holy reality, His body on earth, the church. Let the Holy Spirit breathe upon us. Let the Holy Spirit keep us alive in faith and alive in hope. The Holy Spirit still moves. There is no off switch. The wind of God is blowing. You must hoist your sails, and move as the Spirit leads you. New life. Changed life. Holy life. The joy of knowing and being who you were meant to be, God’s child, is possible. Lord melt our stony hearts, and take away the chaff of our illusion of control in our lives, and mold us into your children after the image of your son, Jesus Christ. Remold us. Remake us. Yours, in Jesus’ name. Amen.