

“Bewildered and Astonished”

Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost

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Our baptism earlier this morning reminded me of a story about another baptism, a baptism that occurred in another Presbyterian church years ago.

I don't know where it was exactly, but the story is told of a Presbyterian minister who was performing a baptism early on in her ministry. She knew the *Book of Order*, she knew the way it needed to go.

It was a mother and her infant daughter...both were being baptized. So the pastor met with the mother, talked about the meaning of baptism. She met with the Session, the Session approved the baptism.

You know the process, right?

In our denomination, there are all these steps that we take BEFORE baptism happens, because we want to make sure that there's MEANING with the baptism, UNDERSTANDING with the baptism...we want to make sure all is done decently and in order.

So...the time came in worship for the baptism.

And in this particular Presbyterian church, the baptismal liturgy called for the pastor to say the following:

“Would those who are presenting themselves for baptism please come forward?”

Well, the mother rose from her pew, carrying her infant daughter. And then, something unexpected took place. Just behind them, a few rows back—two other people rose from their pew.

It was another mother. And her teenage daughter. They were visitors in church that day.

They were not Presbyterian—at least, not yet—but they heard the pastor's invitation:

“Would those who are presenting themselves for baptism please come forward.”

And they wanted to be baptized.

So there they were, standing in front of the sanctuary:

Two people the pastor was planning on seeing.

And two people the pastor had never met before in her life.

What would you do?

If something like that had happened earlier today, what should I have done?

I know what I would've done.

I would have proceeded to baptize all four of them...

and then, I would have most likely arranged for a meeting with the two UNEXPECTED baptismal candidates...so that we could talk about what baptism means, what it means to follow Christ.

So we could talk a bit about what they were signing up for...

That's important, right?

Knowing what it is you're signing up for when you sign up for something?

I raise the question because of our story from Acts.

Luke tells us that on that first Pentecost long ago, that the disciples “were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability...”

And then Peter preaches a sermon.

And we didn't get to this part, but if we keep reading in the second chapter of Acts, we learn that after Peter's sermon, about 3,000 people are baptized that day.

Do you think those 3,000 people who got baptized on that Pentecost day long ago...do you think they had any idea what they were signing up for?

It's a good question.

Not just for those people, but for THESE people.

When you became a part of God's church, or when you joined Westminster Presbyterian Church—when you said yes, I commit my life to following Jesus, to his way of giving, to his way of living, to loving my enemies and forgiving those who do wrong to me—did you know—did you REALLY know—what it was we were signing up for?

I remember when I was in my first call as an associate pastor. Part of my job was to lead the youth groups at the church.

And I recall one evening, we were taking the youth to a Rangers baseball game. I had strict rules at those games. If the youth went anywhere in the stadium, they had to take a friend, and they had to check in with me every 30 minutes.

This was in the days before Smartphones, and most teens at that time did not have a phone, so “checking in” meant walking back to our seats to let me know they were ok. Let's just say I heard a few complaints from the youth about this rule.

Well, when we got back from the game, I recall everyone getting out of their cars, and then one of the youth said, “Wait...where's Shelby?”

I said, “What do you mean, ‘Where's Shelby?’”

“I thought she was with you.”

“No, I thought she was with you.”

This went on for a good 10 or 15 seconds.

“You mean we left one of our youth at the stadium??!!”

I was a nervous wreck. Working myself into a panic, I started to get back in my car and was about to race back to the stadium when one of the trunks of the other cars popped open...and out came Shelby!

They had arrived back at the church 2 minutes before we did and decided to play a joke on their pastor who wanted to keep such close tabs on them at the game!

You know what I thought at that moment?
I thought... I did NOT sign up for this!!

Of course, there were other moments like that along the way.
And...

Moments when I saw those youth grow in their relationship with God.
Moments when they helped me grow as a pastor.

I caught up with some of those youth recently.
They have families, careers of their own.

And now I look back on it...
I am forever grateful for the adventures that they gave me.
I am forever grateful for the ways that they shaped me.

The fact is, I had no idea, at the start of my ministry there, what I was signing up for...

Isn't that the way it works sometimes?

In church, we say we need things to be PREDICTABLE and WELL-PLANNED, right? In our ministries, in our budget, and in our order of worship every Sunday.

But Pentecost reminds us that the Church is NOTHING without the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit...it does not work in predictable ways,
or according to our plans...

There's a story that Bryan Stevenson tells.

Stevenson, as many of you know, is a lawyer who has dedicated his life to working with incarcerated individuals. In his book *Just Mercy*, Stevenson tells the story of a teenager named Charlie.

He describes going to a church gathering, where he spoke about Charlie and “the plight of incarcerated children.”

After he spoke, an elderly couple approached.
They wanted to help Charlie.

Stevenson tried to discourage them from thinking that they could make a difference with Charlie, but they were persistent, so they all agreed that the couple would write Charlie a letter that Stevenson would pass on to him.

Charlie wrote back, and the couple established a correspondence with him. And Stevenson learned that part of the reason this couple was so motivated is that they had lost a grandson—their only grandson—when he was teenager too.

One day, Mr. and Mrs. Jennings went to meet Charlie at the juvenile detention facility in which he was being held.

They reported that they “loved him instantly.”

Stevenson writes:

At one point early on, I tried to caution them against expecting too much from Charlie after his release. “You know, he’s been through a lot. I’m not sure he can just carry on as if nothing has ever happened. I want you to understand he may not be able to do everything you’d like him to do.”

Mrs. Jennings replied:

“We’ve all been through a lot, Bryan, all of us. I know that some have been through more than others. But if we don’t expect more from each other, hope better for one another, and recover from the hurt we experience, we are surly doomed.”

The Jennings went on to help Charlie get his general equivalency degree, and “insisted on financing his college education.”¹

Now...when that couple, Mr. & Mrs. Jennings,
 went to hear Bryan Stevenson speak to their church group years ago,
 and they approached him afterward
 and said that they wanted to do something for Charlie...
did they know what they were signing up for?

They wanted to make a difference in another child’s life.
 But it sounds to me like Charlie also made a difference in THEIR life.

Do you see what they signed up for?
 Not just to change Charlie...but to be changed themselves.

I sometimes wonder if that’s what we REALLY want when we come to church. When new members join Westminster, they speak about the warm welcome they received here, they like the traditional worship, they love our excellent music program, our children’s programming, our youth ministries...they love our church’s commitment to mission.

But beneath all that STRENGTH, and GOOD WORK and EXCELLENCE,
 I wonder if the real reason we come to church is perhaps,
 our own weakness,
 our deep-seated needs that we don’t often discuss...
 our desperate desire for God’s grace to change us...

Scott Harrison is the founder and CEO of charity: water, an organization that helps people in developing countries gain access to clean water.

Now in his younger years, Scott did not set out in life to do this.
 Raised by Christian parents, he rebelled against that upbringing.

In the early 2000s, he was a top nightclub promoter in NY City.

¹ Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014.

By his own description, “his life was an endless cycle of drugs, booze, [all-night parties]—repeat. But ten years in, desperately unhappy and morally bankrupt, he asked himself [a question]:

‘What would the exact opposite of my life look like?’”

One day he decided to get in his car and just start driving—away from New York, away from his reckless life.

And as he drove, he made another decision.

Remembering some of his faith that was planted in him as a child, he told God that he would tithe a year of his life.

“One year for the ten I’d wasted.”

What would that look like?

He tried to volunteer for a humanitarian organization.

The only problem was, no one wanted him.

Former nightclub promoter?

Nah, not interested.

Oxfam, UNICEF, Samaritan’s Purse...they all rejected him.

Eventually, Mercy Ships—an organization that brings surgeons and medical care on a ship to different countries in Africa—they decided to take a chance on Scott.

He was given a simple job: to take pictures and help document what was going on.

But in the course of taking pictures, Scott Harrison became deeply moved by what he encountered—the suffering and poverty of people he had never paid attention to before. And one day he found himself watching a group of women and girls approach a pond.

It was a “filled with muddy green water,” it “smelled of rot and was brimming with water bugs.”

Then he saw the women fill cans with that pond water.

In those cans, they would carry the water back home, the water they would use to cook, to clean, to drink.

And he made a decision to do something about it.

So with no non-profit experience, Scott Harrison left Mercy Ships and started charity: water. Using his former skillset for getting people excited about events, and using his contacts as a nightclub promoter, Scott set up a charity: water event in NY City, and remarkably, he was able to get his fledgling idea off the ground.

Fast forward 12, 13 years later.

As of today, charity: water has helped over 8.5 million people worldwide obtain access to safe, clean water. Wait...a former party-hungry nightclub promoter has helped bring clean water to over 8.5 million people?

Yes, yes.²

I wonder, though...if you had told Scott Harrison, when he was driving away from NY City and told God he would tithe a year of his life—if you had told him that decision would mean:

sleeping in tents on far-away continents,
17-hour bumpy car rides through jungles,
staying in place with no water, no electricity,
sleepless nights,
suffering he could NOT prevent,
battling a lawsuit for trying to do good,
failure, family tension...

do you think he would have signed up for it?

Do you see what we're talking about this morning?

When the Holy Spirit showed up on Pentecost long ago, did the gathered assembly say, "Oh, yeah...tongues of fire. Just what I thought would happen!"

Of course not.

² Scott Harrison with Lisa Sweetingham, *Thirst: A Story of Redemption, Compassion, and a Mission to Bring Clean Water to the World*, New York: Currency, 2018.

They were bewildered.
 They were amazed.
 They were astonished!

And their lives were forever changed.

To be honest, there's a part of me that wants NOTHING to do with that.

I didn't begin my day today with an overwhelming desire for CHANGE.
 My day began with an overwhelming sense that I needed my cup of coffee.
 And then I wanted my Grapenuts cereal.
 And then I wanted to come to worship and have things go like we on our
 staff had planned for them to go.

And I don't want the Holy Spirit messing with my routines.

That's what I say.
 But there's this other part of me—and perhaps it's in you too—
 this part that is DESPERATE for the Holy Spirit
 to do intervene along the way,
 to do something I never saw coming along the
 way...

I once worked with an organist in a church who was a preacher's kid.

Jonathan was the organist's name. When Jonathan was maybe 4 or 5 years old, he was at church, and his dad—who was the preacher there—his dad was leading the children's time. Jonathan was part of the group of kids sitting at the front, listening to his father.

His dad was describing Pentecost, and how the church started when a strong wind blew among the gathered disciples, and tongues of fire rested on each of them.

Tongues of fire...can you imagine if there was a REAL FIRE in the church, he asked the children? What would you do if there was an actual fire in our church?

And Jonathan raised his hand.
 And Jonathan's dad called on his son.
 And Jonathan said loud enough for everyone to hear:
 "Well, the first thing you'd have to do is wake everybody up!"

Now, Jonathan claims that he wasn't trying to be funny.
 But I do think he inadvertently raised a great point.

When was the last time that the Holy Spirit—WOKE YOU UP?

I don't mean from physical sleep.
 I mean from a spiritual status quo.

Look, summer is here.
 For many of us, summer means vacation.
 It means the beach or the mountains.
 It means getting away from the everyday.

Any of you have plans for the summer?
 I hope your summer goes exactly as you have planned.

Well, that's not entirely true.
 I hope your summer goes ALMOST as you have planned.

Because my deeper hope on this Pentecost Sunday is that the Holy Spirit has some plans for you.

I hope the Holy Spirit will pick you up, and plant you with some people or in a place you never saw coming...

I hope the Holy Spirit will change all of us, in ways we didn't even know we needed changing.

A change that leaves all of us AMAZED
 and BEWILDERED
 and ASTONISHED...

(Amen.)