

**How God Redefines “Normal” Acts 2:1-12;10:9-15**  
**Saint Marks UMC, Charleston WV. PENTECOST SUNDAY June 8) 2014**

<sup>2:1</sup> When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

<sup>5</sup> Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup> Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” <sup>12</sup> All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”

<sup>10:9</sup> About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. <sup>10</sup> He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. <sup>11</sup> He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. <sup>12</sup> In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. <sup>13</sup> Then he heard a voice saying, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” <sup>14</sup> But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.” <sup>15</sup> The voice said to him again, a second time, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”

Last Sunday, Janet preached on the scripture that described the **ASCENSION**, when the resurrected Jesus, after having appeared to the apostles and others a number of times, brought the disciples out of town and told them that they were to go back into Jerusalem and await the coming of the Holy Spirit, and then He was taken up out of their sight, into heaven.

And so they did what Jesus told them: they went back into Jerusalem and waited. That is where we pick up the scripture today.

And that is where we also pick up the unfolding story of God IN OUR OWN LIVES today.

Today, life is so much different than it was for

- pre-printing press,
- pre-electronic communication,
- pre-scientific discoveries,
- pre-digital world,
- pre-so-much-of-everything-we-take-for-granted-today.

And yet, in some very fundamental ways, we are very much today like those disciples from of days of old.

We, too, are just two generations away from extinction.

We, too, are so much the product of our own definition of ‘NORMAL.’”

We, too, are sometimes stuck in a rut, even though everything around us is changing, changing, changing.

We, too, are so tempted to want to carry on: based on our own plans, our own devices, our own “”action plans.”

But **sometimes, we need to just STOP AND WAIT.**

STOP AND WAIT **in order to be clothed with POWER FROM ON HIGH.**

And, every now and then, when we think we've got the TIGER BY THE TAIL, life comes up and smacks us in the face, and makes us realize just how NOT IN CONTROL we really are. And makes us realize just HOW DEPENDENT WE are on GOD TO ORDER OUR STEPS IN THIS WORLD.

I want us to particularly remember some of the words of today's extraordinarily familiar scripture lesson:

**the crowd was bewildered ... Amazed and astonished, ... All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”**

This was a great surprise for them! ***They were waiting but had no idea of what was awaiting them!*** It's hard for us to re-capture that because we are so used to the story. Even the Pentecost Flame that arises on the altar table – a surprise three years ago, when we first used it – has now (like much of Pentecost) become old hat.

But God was then, and God still is, doing something NEW IN OUR MIDST.

Much of the surprise in the chapter 2 part of the story had to do with words – with the expression of words and language. That's important stuff.

**Back in the old pioneer days of the American West, Pepe Rodriguez was a notorious bank robber. He would sneak across the border from Mexico, rob banks in Texas, and then escape back into Mexico before the police could catch up with him. One day, though, the police illegally crossed the border into Mexico and followed Pepe into a bar.**

**When they finally took him into custody, they discovered that Pepe did not speak any English and none of the police spoke Spanish. But the bartender informed them that he spoke both Spanish and English and would be happy to serve as an interpreter. So the police asked: “Where did you hide all that money?” And the bartender translated into Spanish.**

**At first, Pepe hesitated, but then when he saw all those police officers, with their drawn weapons pointed at him, he began to tell the bartender where the money was. And the bartender listened carefully as Pepe explained how he had hidden it in a certain cave that was just outside of town.**

**The bartender then turned to the police, who were waiting for the translation. And the bartender said: "Pepe is a very brave man. He said that you are all a bunch of rotten cowards, and to go ahead and shoot him if you want."**

Words are a very important part of what God is doing in **our** world – NO, **IN GOD'S** WORLD – ever since God SPOKE Creation into being, and ever since the WORD BECAME FLESH AND DWELT AMONG US.

And with PENTECOST – **THIS THIRD MOVEMENT OF GOD'S CREATION**, the **words used by God** were to **increase**, to **be inclusive** ... to **not cast aside**.

And the whole Pentecost story – the BIRTH OF THE CHURCH – is replete with illustration after illustration of God tearing down walls, of flinging open the gates, of EVERYONE BEING INVITED IN.

After the Spirit came into that Upper Room on Pentecost and the small movement of a dozen or so people growing to 3,000 plus on that day, we jump forward a few chapters to chapter 10, where we are told that the apostle Peter (who so often got it wrong when he was with Jesus – but who is now under the power of the Holy Spirit) is told in a vision: **“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”**

And from the first Annual-Conference-like scenario (in Acts 15) when the Church tried to figure out if they were going to continue as a sect within Judaism or if the doors would be flung open to the Gentiles ... the Church has been grappling with that issue ever since.

If Peter and Paul had not prevailed upon the Church to accept the command of the Holy Spirit, which spoke in ALL languages so that ALL could be invited, that **“What God has made clean, you must not call profane”** ... if THAT had not happened, **YOU AND I would not have been invited to be in the Church today. WE were the outsiders then!**

***And throughout the whole history of the Church, God has been re-defining NORMAL.***

No one **born with a physical deformity** had been welcome into the Church which Jesus attended. What appeared in their scripture (i.e. what they called “the word of God”) specifically PROHIBITED ANYONE BORN WITH BIRTH DEFECTS. And they not only relied upon what they called “the word of God.” They also said, “Those people just aren’t NORMAL.”

Whether we want to talk about people with birth defects, or people whose skin color is different -- **or any of the other categories that Adolph**

**Hitler also used as a litmus of acceptability** – the Church has for its entire history been SURPRISED by the Holy Spirit into understanding that God’s definition of NORMAL is different from the limitations that humans use to limit membership.

When I attended United Methodist Women training (**don’t forget their luncheon meeting right after worship today, please**) last week in Portland, Oregon, in order to teach the Mission u classes in July of this year in Buckhannon, I was taken aback by the sharp realization which came in liturgy, much like our Call and Response to the Scripture, as printed in today’s bulletin.

I’m still amazed today, when I read contemporary news accounts of people who want to treat black folks in America like they are second class citizens. Part of what amazes me is that 50 years ago in America, things that shock us today were ordinarily accepted as true.

I grew up in a culture in which the color of a person’s skin was legitimately accepted as a basis for exclusion from almost everything white, including the Church.

But, from Pentecost forward, the HOLY SPIRIT has always been

- opening the table,
- tearing down the gates,
- squelching the words of “BUT THAT’S JUST NOT NORMAL,”

to say instead: **“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”**

From Jackie Robinson’s radical inclusion into the all white Major League Baseball, within *just the past 66 years* ... up through the children being taught in VBS this year about God’s welcoming love to the left out, to the different, to the afraid, to the hungry, to the “other” ... it’s more than just a three week sermon series – **IT IS THE VERY NATURE OF GOD’S NORMAL.**

God **invites** ALL.

God **includes** ALL.

God **wants** ALL.

And ***whenever we stand in the way of anyone feeling welcome, we need to know that we are standing in the way of the movement of God’s Holy Spirit.***

When we are shaken down to our very foundation by the sudden and painful unfolding of life, and we pray for God’s Holy Spirit to come and

HEAL, to come and make sense of it ... we need to remember that we are asking God to surprise us.

**How open we are to God's surprise in our life, to God's miracles, to God's amazing power is directly related to how much we try to put a straight jacket on God's notion of NORMAL in our daily living.**

**We can't shut some people out, and expect God to do powerful things in our life.**

It exposes our theology and our narrow understanding of God, for what it is.

We live in a time in which the world no longer bows down and does whatever the Church says. We live in a time when the rules and expectations of a youth activities coach are more important than the meeting times of Church and Youth Group.

**We ought not be surprised by this** ... if we are still trying to straight jacket the Holy Spirit. WE CANNOT HAVE IT BOTH WAYS!

**There is a story from the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century Christian Church that ought still speak to us. It is the story of a young monk in the desert of Egypt who went to one of the wise desert fathers. He asked the old man what he should do to live a whole and faithful Christian faith and life. The older monk asked the younger what was his present practice of Christian living. The younger responded that he customarily said his prayers, kept his fast, adhered to his rule of life as best he can, and generally was kind to his fellow brothers.**

**At that point the elder stood up and extended his hands above his head and stood there until ... WHOOSH ... all ten of his fingers became lamps of flame, and he said to the younger, "If you will, all of your life can become as of fire."**

We sophisticated people of the 21st century like to squeeze the life out of stories like that, just like we tend to limit the power of the Pentecost story to mere metaphor or hyperbole.

- When we quit putting limits on God;
- when we stop trying to limit God's open doors;
- when we open our eyes to the POWER and the UNLIMITED NOTION of NORMAL that God chooses in Creation,

THEN ... and perhaps not until then ... will "**all of your life can become as of fire.**" If not, then we are stuck with whatever the status quo of human limits provides. **What will YOU choose?**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
AMEN.