



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“First Love” (Acts 2) Holy Spirit Sunday, and Mothers Day Healing Ministry

When I was back in Kansas City, researching youth programs so that I could improve the one I was leading, I spent a lot of time with Young Life Club members and leaders. At one of their training sessions, Club Leader Don Stuber asked me to step out of the room while he talked with some of the kids on his leadership team. Soon I was invited back, and they did some other business, and then Don asked them to learn a new fun song we could teach to the Club in the upcoming meeting. I don't remember exactly which one, but it involved animal sounds—you know, pigs and ducks, etc. So, Don picked up his guitar, and taught the melody and words, and then we sang it together. They went through a verse that imitated a pig (“oink, oink”) and a duck (“quack, quack”). Then they came to a part where a rooster was to crow, and suddenly everyone stopped and looked at me.

What they expected was that I was going to go right ahead and crow like a rooster, and flap my ‘wings’. But because I'd been sent out in the hall, my suspicions were raised, and I was very vigilant. When the music stopped, so did I—just in time to avoid making a fool of myself.

Now, I understood that this was all in good fun, but even as an adult of 28 or 29, I carried with me a morbid fear of looking foolish in front of others. We call that, “shame”, don't we? And my instincts were so highly developed that I could react in a split-second to stop short of being foolish all by myself.

That's not healthy. Since that time, I've deliberately allowed myself to look foolish a number of times. (And, I've also acted foolishly a number of times since then, without trying!) But I think most of us in this room—most church people in Mainline congregations—carry a significant fear of looking foolish in front of others.

But do you remember the first time you were in love—real love, adult love, not just ‘puppy love’? Boy, I do. I was a little bit nuts (which may be hard for you to imagine). I couldn't stop talking about this gal. I couldn't get enough time with her. No one had to tell me I “ought” to see her—it was more like, “Don't get in my way!”

We're going to meet some familiar people today, acting in a most unfamiliar way. They're going to show us something about what it can look like, when you are in love—with God. Open your Bibles to the book of Acts. It's just after the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. You probably know it was written by Luke, just as Luke wrote the gospel that bears his name. Find chapter two, and listen with me for God's Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. *[text]*

Foolish! Crazy! Out of their minds! DRUNK!

Why do you suppose the pilgrims in Jerusalem for the Pentecost Festival might have thought this about Jesus' disciples? Sometimes we can learn a lot from our opponents or critics or detractors. To have seemed like drunkards suggests something observable about the disciples' behavior, too, not just words. Were the disciples laughing and giggling? In their (literal) "enthusiasm", were they behaving wildly--which looked like carousing to others?!

You might think we're drunk, replies Peter, but something very different is going on here. And Peter launches into the first Christian sermon.

As I was reading, were you aware of all the quotes from the Old Testament Peter brought up—words of prophets of long ago that Jesus uniquely fulfilled? Last week I shared with you my conviction that the Holy Spirit had been working on (and with) the disciples in that upper room, while Jesus had told them to wait. They didn't know what they were waiting for, or when "the surprise" would come along. But after they obediently settled in, the Spirit started tickling their memories, and they started remembering words from their (Old Testament) Scriptures, and started to match them up with things they remember Jesus doing and saying--Jesus' Passion and Death and Resurrection, especially. Maybe it became a game—to see how many connections they could discover. They kept finding more and more and more, and their excitement grew, and grew, and grew! So when the Spirit filled them and turned them loose, it was like each one was a coiled spring finally released—their joy and enthusiasm bubbled over, and they were praising God. Nature itself gave a "drum roll" of the sound of wind, as you heard enacted today, and they started jumping like jumping beans, as I picture it—so "fired up" by the Holy Spirit, it was like the Placer High Varsity Football Team bursting onto the football field.

Drunk? Says Peter. Oh, no. Listen to me, sons and daughters of Abraham, Jews from all over the known world! Have I got something to tell YOU!

And with the scriptures and the story of Jesus' ministry and Passion and Resurrection, Peter helps people in that crowd "get it" about Jesus, too. The Holy Spirit hasn't stopped yet—the Spirit leads more and more of the crowd to "see the light", and understand what has happened, and to feel the force of their misguided rejection of Jesus. What can we do? they ask Peter.

"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation!" "Corrupt" in Greek means, literally, "crooked", or "warped".

And some 3,000 people do exactly that; they turn around, repent, think about their lives differently. Three thousand little spiritual babies are born that very day.

I like what we read next. So many of the people Jesus met have a reaction to (their healing, for example), and then he doesn't hear from them again. Here, we get a quick portrait of a complete change of lifestyle. These new believers spent tons of time together. They go deeper into God's Word. They practice hospitality—everyone pooled their resources; they couldn't stand to leave tow. As they "got it" at deeper and deeper levels, as they felt the pleasure of God, they started going to the Temple to praise God any day, not just on the Sabbath. They were changed forever!

Dare WE look ‘so foolish’?? Do you have the courage, the trust in God, to give yourself fully to God?

When we talk this way about “loving God”, I know that makes some people nervous. A friend of mine who died last year once came up to me after I’d talked about this, and confessed to me he was having trouble with it. “I can love my wife,” he said, “but I don’t think it’s right to love God that way.” He just couldn’t make the leap from love of his wife to love of God.

But there are understandable reasons to be wary of loving God, even if you get the concept. When you love someone, your judgment gets tweaked. You “play favorites”—you can’t help yourself. You also open up your heart to a world of hurt. Love is risky. You might give too much—give too much and not get back. The loved one might ask more than you are prepared to give, and you have to decide, “How much do I really love him?” You allow your beloved to influence you more than anyone else.

THAT’s the love we see overflowing on Pentecost. THAT’s what I mean when I say, “they ‘got it’”. It’s not just an intellectual answer “to life’s persistent questions;” it’s a grab for “your heart and mind and soul and strength.” THIS is the faith it takes to please God! (Hebrews 11:6)

Can you allow God to fill you up so much, and take you over like that? Can you stand to look foolish because of your enthusiasm, your response of love to the One who fills you to overflowing?

That’s why I called this sermon, “first love”. The Spirit spoke to John the Elder as he was writing down his “revelations” and “messages to the churches” in the last book of our Bibles. Remember? “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: . . . I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked [people], that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place . . . He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. (Revelation 2:1-7, NIV)

Was there a time when you had a love for God that seemed to fill you up? Or have you always kept the lid on, kept control, managed “the God part” of you like you manage everything else? No wonder so many Christians in the West are so passive about God and live no differently than their culture--getting divorced at the same rate, falling victim to political delusions, making no difference in the culture. Harmless. Managed faith is like our system of “competitive managed health care”, and thousands of people die in this country every year so that the insurance providers can grow rich. In Greek, the word for “health” is the same word for “salvation”. Managed to death; God squeezed out, domesticated. So we think.

Like the church at Laodicea in Revelation 3, the Lord says, “So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” (Revelation 3:16, NIV)

Some years ago in the Midwest, a fire broke out one evening in a small church building. Nearly everyone from the little town came to watch the firemen battle the flames. The pastor noticed an inactive member standing nearby watching the smoke and flames. Walking over to this indifferent member he said, "Well I don't remember seeing you here before." "Well," said the man, "I don't remember our church ever being on fire before."

Shame on our churches for not demonstrating what hot love for God looks like. Christians in the First World West often have to travel to the Third World to see churches on fire for God.

Pentecost is our call from God to drop our defenses, and let God have a straight shot at our hearts. Pentecost is a reminder of who we were meant to be.

A flock of wild geese was flying south for the winter, when one of the geese looked down and noticed a group of domestic geese by a pond on a farm. He saw that they had plenty of grain to eat, so he went down to join them. The food was so good, he decided to stay with the domestic geese until spring, when his own flock would fly north again. When spring came, he heard his old flock going by and flew up to join them. The goose had grown fat, however, and flying was difficult, so he decided to spend one more season on the farm and join the wild geese on their next winter migration. The following fall, when his former flock flew southward, the goose flapped his wings a little, but kept eating his grain. By the next time they passed overhead, the now-domesticated goose didn't even notice them.

Pentecost is a call to find the love of God that compels us, like Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians. (2 Cor. 5:14, NIV)

The Church has been called, "The Mother of Faith". What kind of faith is nurtured in our people—the false faith that cuts God down to our size? Mothers, how are you raising your children in faith? Is being a Christian nothing more than being a good boy or a good girl? In our zeal to protect our kids from danger, are we also protecting them from God? Are you even acquainted with the God who would be your first love? Would you like to be?

If any of you who want more of God, open up your hearts. Set aside the time—no easy thing, I grant you, but JUST DO IT. Tell God—today, tomorrow, each day—that you are repenting of your management mania, your demonic desire to remain in control. You are dropping your defenses, and asking God to ravish you like a lover. You deeply desire God to be your "first love".

Do you dare?

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on May 11, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]