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When Love Breaks Through

Acts 2:21

In preparation for Pentecost Sunday a pastor asked a member of his congregation who was an artist to produce a painting to support the preaching of the word on that Sunday. The artist was on his own to identify the message he wanted the painting to convey. He produced a six by three foot canvas with tongues of flame appearing over the heads of the disciples. But the most striking characteristic of the painting is a figure placed in the center who is looking directly at the viewer. His index finger is pointing at the viewer like Uncle Sam in the old army recruitment posters. The artist wanted to convey that while Pentecost is an event rooted in the history of the Church it is most of all about us. Pentecost demands from us a response (Jim Honig, Christian Century, May 31, 2011, page 19).

The options available to us in responding to this bizarre event are described by Luke in the second chapter of Acts. Luke tells us that some people responded with cynicism. They ridiculed the disciples and accused them of being drunk on new wine. By accusing the disciples of being drunk they were using a manageable category to contain this unexplainable development.

When the winds of change blow across our landscape we are always tempted to look for manageable categories to contain them. That is why we look to our institutions to resist change. But the message of Pentecost is that no institution can contain the wind of the Spirit. When God is ready for change there is no force that can prevent it. Cynicism in the face of change continues to be the most frequent response to the Pentecost event.

But Luke tells us that there is another response to situations that we cannot explain or control. There were some witnesses to Pentecost who remained open to the winds of change. There was after all a large crowd of people who listened to what Peter had to say in his sermon. They did not try to tame the Spirit by constructing manageable categories. They did not direct ridicule toward those who were at the center of the change that God was initiating. They could see clearly enough that the disciples were not intoxicated from the consumption of alcoholic beverages. The disciples were intoxicated on something very different. They were drunk with the dizzying possibility that the love of God had redefined their world. Their imaginations were energized by the prospect that this love could not be contained. Peter's sermon concludes with an

affirmation of just how limitless this love is. “Then everyone who calls the name of the Lord shall be saved (Acts 2:21).” Those who could see God’s love breaking through to them at Pentecost were overwhelmed with wonder.

We live in a time when the divergent responses to the Pentecost event can be seen in sharp relief. In North America and Europe cynicism is increasingly the order of the day. The regions of the world which have been the leading centers of Christianity for many centuries are today experiencing an unprecedented spiritual decline. As a result these are tough times for churches in North America and Europe.

But the response to the Pentecost event is very different in Africa and Asia. Christian churches on those continents are experiencing unprecedented growth. As one religious scholar has summoned it up, “Christianity was born in Asia and Africa and in our lifetimes it has decided to go home (Philip Jenkins, *The Charlotte Observer*, February 7, 2011, page 16). This trend is particularly striking in Africa. During the 20th century about half of the population of the African Continent moved from tribal or pagan religions to either Christianity or Islam. Africans have been choosing Christianity over Islam by a margin of four to one. Between 1900 and the year 2000 the number of Christians in Africa grew from 10 million to 363 million. By 2015 the number of African Christians will reach 500 million. If the trend continues to the middle of this century Africa will become the first continent in human history to have a billion Christians.

Some scholars have noted that this growth is related to the fact that the world of the Bible is very much like the world that Africans experience today. It is a world where poverty is common, where idols are literally worshiped and where many people never make it to old age. When they see the love of God breaking through to them they are filled with wonder. They are ready for the change that Pentecost brings.

The love which breaks through at Pentecost is reaching out to us today. How will you respond?