

*John Docherty, 14 May, 2016*

## **Out of chaos, the Spirit creates!**

The theme for this morning's service, from the Leader magazine, is “Out of chaos, the Spirit creates!” This is Pentecost Sunday, the day on which the Holy Spirit falls on the disciples and marks the beginning of the Christian era, or, at least, the beginning of the era in which the Christian church is equipped to function in the absence of Jesus.

Up until this point, those who had followed Jesus and hoped for the inauguration of his reign could easily be described as a timid, somewhat fearful group. They were certainly cautious. At least, following his crucifixion and resurrection, we don't hear much of their activities, other than their decision to replace Judas with Matthias. Jesus had been horribly tortured and put to death on a cross, and though he had appeared to them at different times following his resurrection, they were still very much on their own, and apparently unsure of how to muddle along in his absence.

Then Pentecost happens. We're told they were all together in one place; a sound like a rushing of a mighty wind fills the house they're in; something that looks like tongues of fire appears over their heads; and this band of a hundred and twenty are “filled with the Holy Spirit”. They go out of the place they've been sitting in and start preaching with a boldness that has escaped them until now.

And not only preaching boldly – they're speaking in languages foreign to them. They're standing up in a public space and the end result of their preaching is that about three thousand converts are immediately added to their number. It's a pretty spectacular turnaround.

Pentecost.

I suppose when most of us hear that word we draw an immediate association to Pentecostals who have an intense focus on the events of this day, and who lean heavily on a particular understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit as manifested in the second chapter of Acts, and to later references in Paul's letter to the Corinthians regarding spiritual gifts, particularly the more spectacular gifts of the Holy Spirit – e.g. speaking in tongues, prophecies, miraculous healings, etc.

And, depending on the nature of our experiences with Pentecostal Christians, we're likely to have a wide range of attitudes and feelings about this way of understanding how the Holy Spirit is at work. That, in turn, may colour our thinking on the Holy Spirit in general. Our comfort zones may well be all over the map, though I suspect if you're very comfortable here at MFM, and very comfortable with how we do church, you're

probably less comfortable in Pentecostal circles, and less willing to embrace a theology that puts so much emphasis on such a highly personal and other-worldly experience.

But I don't intend to engage in Pentecostal-bashing this morning. I've said many times that I don't seek, or particularly feel the need, for an ecstatic experience of God, but I can understand the appeal of doing church in a style that encourages a very personal, a very intimate, and a very “spiritual” experience. It's just that that's exactly what *I* get here at MFM.

I also understand that while some Pentecostal-type church services may tend to be structured in a way that may feel a bit choreographed to someone like me, the underlying desire, when the service is prepared with integrity, is to enrich the individual's experience of God. It's not meant to be a manipulative exercise, or a spectator sport.

I'm also only too aware that we Mennonites live in a bubble of our own, if I can borrow the phrase from our Pentecostal visitor from last week. We have our own idiosyncrasies - *and* our own blind spots - so I have little inclination to burst someone else's bubble for fear that my own be damaged in the resulting fallout.

One of the reasons that I've said I'm willing to speak up to twice a month, so long as the Sundays are not back-to-back, is that I have a bit of an obsessive streak. I spend a lot of time preparing my meditations, and once I've delivered a meditation, I spend the next few days rehearsing in my mind what was said, how it was said, and whether I could have, or perhaps, should have, said some things differently. It doesn't leave a lot of headspace for new thoughts and a new meditation.

The last time I spoke, a couple of weeks ago, I intimated that at most of the churches I've been a part of, I've sometimes wondered about what exactly is happening when we gather together. I expressed the hope that our Sunday morning experience is not just a performance, but an authentic act of worship – that we are, in fact, meeting God when we come here. I tempered that statement by saying that “We put a lot of effort into preparing an experience that we hope is meaningful, stimulating and respectful of the different ways that we experience God” and I said I hoped that our worship services fulfill that need for each of you to meet God in some way.

But my comment about the risk of our services being a performance has been haunting me, because I realize that some could have misinterpreted what I meant, and been offended by the suggestion. Our musicians could have been offended; our song leaders could have been offended; those who agree to participate in dramatic readings or skits could have been offended; children's storytellers could have been offended; those who prepare worship visuals could have been offended; worship leaders could have been

offended; anyone who'd ever agreed to bring a meditation could have been offended; in fact, anyone taking any part in any worship service could have been offended by my remark if they thought I was suggesting I thought there might be something “spiritual” lacking in their participation.

So, with regard to any possible offence, the first thing I'd like to do is apologize and state for the record that I don't for a moment wonder about the motivations or attitudes of anyone who agrees to be a part of our worship services. I know that contributing something to a worship service is in itself an act of worship, and I didn't mean, and don't want, to diminish that in any way.

But I do think that the risk is there. The Sunday morning service is an “event”. It doesn't just happen on its own and we have our own “choreographed” structure that we follow very carefully. We also have very talented participants who provide a very polished flow to our liturgy. Finding that delicate balance that allows for a well-prepared service without it becoming a “show” is part of the challenge of doing church.

I think that one of the elements of *our* pattern that protects us from the risk of “performance” is the simple fact of our modest size and our intimate connection to each other. We *know* each other. We know that the various pieces that come together to make this service meaningful – the music, the children's story, the hymns, the prayers, the scripture readings, the visuals – are a reflection of *us*. They're not parts of a structured liturgy so much as a combination of our varied interests and abilities. In the best possible way, we're *sharing* that with each other.

The other thing that I think helps protect us from the risk of the worship service becoming a “performance” is our sharing time, and it's one of the reasons I value that time so much. It's a moment when we hit the pause button on the flow of the service, and allow the Spirit to fully take over.

Now ... I know that may sound a bit heavy-handed - “allowing the Spirit to fully take over” - but I really do think that this is what happens during our sharing time. We enter a period of the spontaneous; the unpredictable; a time when anything can happen. We keep an eye on the clock, but we also keep an eye on the need for the space to move into things intimate; things that bind us together as a community of faith, as a community of human beings, and as a community of friends.

Because, “doing church” is a time of community building as well as an act of worship. And I would argue that community building of *this* sort is itself an act of worship. The theme for today's service, again, is “Out of chaos, the Spirit creates!”, and it seems to me that the act of coming together on a Sunday morning, and being bound to each other in the sharing of our needs, our thoughts, our reflections, our struggles, our joys, is part of

the embodiment of that statement.

Out of the fragmentation of our busy schedules and the many demands on our time;

out of the myriad circles that dominate our lives and pull us in any number of directions;

out of the multiple relationships that define us and that sometimes challenge us;

out of the chaos that swirls about us in a world that sometimes seems like it's gone mad;

God pulls us together on Sunday morning and works at creating something new; a community of people seeking to be transformed in order to do things differently, much like that group of a hundred and twenty waiting for something to happen at Pentecost.

We say we believe that where two or three are gathered to worship, God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, is present. And we believe that this act of coming together is an integral part of God's ongoing act of creation through the Holy Spirit.

How we express our understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit might differ, depending on our traditions perhaps.

As I was preparing this meditation, for example, I was confronted with a few different ways of describing the transformative nature of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. All Christian churches believe that we are being changed as God works on and through us, but we can have very different ways of expressing that.

One of the writers I came across was the author of an article in the Vision Journal, published by the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary – AMBS – now known as the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. Her name is Cheryl Bridges Johns and she is professor of discipleship and Christian formation at the Pentecostal Theological Seminary in Cleveland, Tennessee. I take issue with some of the points she makes in her article, but, among other things, she describes the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in this way :

“... the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the churches allows for the reconstruction of life in the face of death. The Holy Spirit brings life to places that have been ravaged by sin. People with addictions are set free. Bodies are healed. Families are restored. Where the Holy Spirit resides, human life flourishes. It is the intention of God to restore creation, and the Holy Spirit is the agent of that restoration ...”

I have no problem with that statement. But ... I will admit that I'm more comfortable with how C.S. Lewis says much the same thing, in his Anglican kind of way, of the

transforming work of the Holy Spirit, in a quote from “Mere Christianity” :

“The real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day. Standing back from all your natural fussings and frettings; coming in out of the wind.

We can only do it for moments at first. But from those moments the new sort of life will be spreading through our system: because now we are letting Him work at the right part of us. It is the difference between paint, which is merely laid on the surface, and a dye or stain which soaks right through. He never talked vague, idealistic gas. When He said, 'Be perfect', He meant it. He meant that we must go in for the full treatment. It is hard; but the sort of compromise we are all hankering after is harder – in fact, it is impossible. It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.”

I like Lewis a lot. I like his grounded, earthy grasp of the interaction between ordinary life and the life of the Spirit. I like his honest acknowledgement of our imperfect nature, while still drawing us forward towards a better state.

I'm grateful for MFM. I'm glad t have found a place where my own imperfect nature can be embraced, comforted and challenged.

And whether or not I think I can discern something approaching tongues of fire over the heads around this circle, I know that the Spirit is at work and creating something new out of the chaos of our lives.