

The Message for May 27, 2012

Acts 2:1-21

Growing the Church

The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller

How many of you love surprises – especially on our birthday? Listen to this birthday surprise story from the Associate Press dated January 2009:

The youngster was so engrossed in the cupcakes his mother brought to his class on Wednesday that he didn't notice the enormous wrapped box off to the side. "That's one big, giant present," a six-year-old classmate told him. "See what you got, Gabriel."

Gabriel peeled back the wrapping paper to find the surprise of his young life: his father, an Army mechanic was home on leave from his second tour in Iraq.

"It's my dad!" he announced to his classmates at Sutro Elementary School in Dayton, near Carson City. "Hi, Daddy."

Army Spc. Casey Hurles, 23, hadn't seen his son since he left in June. When he learned his leave would coincide with his son's birthday, he hatched a plan to hide out in the big box. "It was such a rush of emotion," said Hurles, who said he got butterflies in his stomach while waiting in the box.

After Hurles sat down and ate a cupcake with the birthday boy, teacher Dawn VanSickle presented him with a banner from the class that read, "Welcome Home. Thank you for your service."

VanSickle said she was happy to arrange the reunion in her classroom. "One of the first things (Gabriel) shared about himself was that his dad was in Iraq and that he was waiting for his dad to come home," she said. "He talks about his dad all the time."

Hurles, who joined the Army four years ago, is a mechanic in the 1st Cavalry Division stationed at Fort Hood, Texas. He completed one tour in Iraq and is seven months into his second tour. He expects to finish sometime this summer. Gabriel said he looks forward to playing with his dad over the next two weeks but understands why he has to leave again. "He has to work," Gabriel said. "He works in the war."

What a great story. I love stories like that. Can you imagine that little boy's surprise receiving a gift like that?

Consider this story of surprise. It's a little different a bit more humorous... There was a woman visiting a church one Sunday and the pastor was preaching a rather long sermon. The woman noticed that the people sitting around her were falling asleep. After worship she turned to an older tired looking gentleman and wanting to be nice she said, "Hello, I'm Gladys Dunn." The older gentleman perked up and said, "I'm glad it's done too. I'm out of here!"

I often wonder when people come here to worship at Friedens, what do you expect? Do you expect to be surprised and find God doing a new thing in this place or do you expect to be bored, business as usual, can hardly wait to get out of here?

I've discovered that we find in this place exactly what we are looking for. I expect God to show up. And every Sunday I'm pleasantly surprised to find that God does.

Today we celebrate Pentecost the birthday of the church a day for celebration and surprises. So happy birthday! I hope when our worship is over here this morning you don't say something like, "I'm glad it's done." I hope you say something like, "Now that was a surprise!"

In our reading from Acts today we have a story of surprise. God surprises the church with the gift of the Holy Spirit!

Here is the scene. Just before Jesus ascended into heaven he told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit so that's what they were doing. People from all over the world were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Pentecost. It was a special holiday, something like our Thanksgiving without the football games. Picture thousands of people crowded into Jerusalem to give thanks to God.

We're told that 120 of Jesus' disciples were together in a house near the Temple. Now I need to point out that the church had grown from 12 down to 11 and then to 120 in only 50 days. The church was growing. They didn't miss out on gathering together to give thanks to God.

Suddenly in the middle of worship, in the middle of giving thanks to God, without warning, there was a loud sound like a rushing wind, and then something that looked like tongues of fire appearing on their heads. Look at the candle here this morning and notice how the flames are dancing. That's the image we have here. They were dancing around all over the place and a flame on each one of their heads. That would certainly get your attention - what a surprise. They were all (get this all) filled with the Holy Spirit each one of them and their worship spills outside onto the streets. They started praising God in languages they had never spoken before. Immediately, they are surrounded by a crowd of people who are trying to figure out what in the world is going on with these disciples? "What does all this mean?"

There are thousands of people there with different looks, different customs, and different languages, all together in one place. This is where God chooses to act. It's a perfect picture of the church - diversity and our unity is our relationship with Jesus. The wind and the fire prepare the way for the disciples to speak God's message to the people!

I want to point out three things here:

First -- when God decides to do something God does it up big. Sending the Holy Spirit was big.

Second -- this story reminds us that the church has been given the gift of God's message to share with all the people -- a message of love and grace and mercy and forgiveness available to us in Christ Jesus. It's a message the church is to share with everyone throughout the world no matter what language they speak or where they live.

Third -- This was the beginning of something new. God is into doing new things. When it comes to God -- "Never say never..." Instead -- "With God all things are possible."

The first people to respond to this new things God was doing were the religious snobs -- I mean religious leaders. They questioned the validity and credentials of these out of towners -- "You can't trust them. They're nobodies -- aren't they all Galileans?" Others responded by trying to explain the whole thing away suggesting that they are all drunk.

Picture all these people gathered around listening to the disciples talk about God's deeds of power in their own language. And it makes sense to them.

There two problems here. **First** how did they learn to speak in these languages? There was no Rosetta Stone. And **second** why are these common people talking about God. "God talk" was left to the professional not regular, normal, everyday people. It takes someone special to talk about God - right? No -- it doesn't. That's why they all are wondering what does all this mean? This isn't normal.

Does that ever happen to you in worship?
Do you ever wonder what does all this mean for you?
Do you ever ask what is going on here? What is God up to here?

Peter responds saying, "This is a God moment folks... This is God at work in the world. These people are not drunk. No! The Spirit of God is on the loose, and God is doing a new thing in the world through the Holy Spirit -- continuing the work that Jesus started..."

Peter then quotes the prophet Joel explaining that past and the present is preparing us for the future. God is at work in the world doing a new thing -- get ready today because tomorrow is coming.

Oddly enough this is God's plan for growing the church. Tell people the Jesus story -- tell everyone how God is restoring the world through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Death to life, dark to light, sickness to health, war to peace. God is in the process of putting all things and all people in a right relationship with one another. God is in the restoration business. God is in the forgiveness business.

In a perfect world everything would be different. But we don't live in a perfect world. That's why we need Jesus and the Holy Spirit in our lives.

I wanted to end this message in a big surprising way. I wanted to somehow fill you with the Holy Spirit and send you out of here transformed by the grace of God. I wanted to give you a Pentecost experience here this morning. But then God plunked me on the head and reminded me that, I can't do that. That was a one time event some 2000 years ago. Then God plunked me on the head again and said, "Just tell them the story."

It's a surprise story that begins like this: *For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son so that whoever believes in him will not perish but will have everlasting life. God did not send the Son to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

We are living proof of the story. Happy Birthday! Amen.