

FIRMLY BOUND, FOREVER FREE



Scripture:

Acts 2:1-16

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

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

John 3:1-9

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”



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For a few minutes this morning, I invite you to see the Day of Pentecost through the eyes of a Pharisee, for I believe it is a good idea to try to see things through the eyes of another. It helps us to gain perspective, to understand different points of view, and to learn something about others and ourselves in the process. So, I invite you to see with the eyes and feel with the heart of a Pharisee.

You know your history well. God’s people, *your* people, had suffered many things in their history. They had been beaten down numerous times, their homeland destroyed, devastation all around, people killed, left to die or exiled. You have known first-hand the pressures to assimilate into the Hellenistic culture and give up your Jewish heritage, culture and religion. Now, for you, everything is at stake. It is a

matter of life and death for you to preserve the faith and to live the faith down to the minutest detail. No more being ground down, beaten and exiled by foreign nations on account of losing favor with God. No more rebuilding out of the ashes. We will get it right this time, LEARN the rules, LIVE the rules and God will see to it that this will never happen again! That was the passion of a Pharisee.

DAY OF PENTECOST

And seen through the eyes of a Pharisee, the Day of Pentecost was big trouble. Suddenly there is this incredible commotion. A sound like the rush of a mighty wind; divided tongues as of fire flickering down touching those followers of Jesus, and the din and confusion of many voices speaking in different tongues, yet everyone hears and understands! This is a very dangerous and frightening thing to a Pharisee. This scene is totally out of control. You and your colleagues had carefully and thoroughly constructed the rules, regulations and rituals necessary to find favor with God. Jesus and his followers were constantly trying to pull people away. You had hoped that with the death of that dangerous renegade Jesus, his followers would disperse and the diversionary teachings would die as well. But these people are listening and responding! About three-thousand people signed up as followers of Jesus that day. As seen through your eyes, as felt in the pit of your stomach, this is danger. Real danger. This does not square with your rules. Too much of this kind of thing will make God angry. This could bring defeat and exile, again. What's a good Pharisee to do?

WHAT ABOUT US?

But is that our concern? What does a Pharisee from two-thousand years ago in some far-off place have to do with us? I imagine if we are really honest with ourselves, if we take a closer, deeper look, we will find that at least a little Pharisee rubbed off on us over the generations. Imagine hearing this from God: "I have called you by name and you are mine.

You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." And then having Jesus follow up with this tersely worded direction, "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself." Would this really be enough for you? Aren't you even a little curious about what it might take to remain in God's good graces? Aren't there some requirements? Minimum standards? Recommendations even?

**How, then, shall we live if
God is going to insist on loving us
no matter what we do?**

THE PHARISEE NAMED NICODEMUS

Let's enter the life of another Pharisee to find out. This one was named Nicodemus. I imagine Nicodemus was a troubled sort. He had all of his rules and regulations, he lived his meticulous life of obedience, and still, something was wrong; something was missing. I think he must have come to a place where he wasn't sure that the Law was all it was touted to be. Nicodemus was so troubled that he just had to talk to Jesus. So it was that he came by night. There was a lot at stake: his identity, his standing in the religious community, his understanding of what it meant to be right with God. No wonder he took baby steps, slow, halting, cautious, under-cover-of-night steps that brought him there to Jesus.

Nicodemus began cautiously, testing the waters, wondering how he would be received, humbling himself in a way and lifting Jesus up: "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

JESUS' RESPONSE

Jesus apparently was not in the mood for testing the waters and social niceties. Instead, he cut right to the chase and with a hard saying at that: "Unless a person is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

“How can this be?” asked Nicodemus, focusing on the very literal prospects of physically returning to the womb and being born a second time.

Ignoring the question and without skipping a beat, Jesus pressed on with the most shocking statements: “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew. Do not be astonished that I say this. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

BUILT ON THE WRONG FOUNDATION

Imagine yourself in Nicodemus’ sandals. Your life has been built on the Law, every meticulous detail of it, knowing it and living it as the bedrock for finding favor with God and keeping it. But now, Jesus tells you in no uncertain terms that your whole life is built on the wrong foundation, that your understandings and interactions with God and others have been misguided and misdirected. Worse yet, he lets you know that your current way of being and living are the very things that will prevent you from seeing the kingdom of God. Jesus urges, “You must start anew and go a whole different direction. You simply must!” I can understand how Nicodemus would hold his head in his hands with a look of dismay and say, “How can these things be?” That night, Jesus kept on teaching and somewhere along the way, Nicodemus shook his head and quietly slipped away as mysteriously as he had come. Surely he must have pondered what it might be like to be free from the Law but captive to the Spirit, born up and blown about where the Spirit wills. How mightily he must have struggled when it became clear to him that you could not serve both “the Law” and “the Spirit.”

ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN

And how about us? Are we ready to loosen our grip on the things that we cling to in vain and then be blown about on the winds of God’s Spirit? That’s the question of Pentecost, and a

tough one at that. It’s hard to give up control, to give up making plans and schemes as if they are set in stone. It can be rather inconvenient and messy to have your plans changed, priorities rearranged, activities determined by someone else, all of the time. And yes, there is tremendous joy that comes along, but it is not always a walk in the park, that’s for sure. The Spirit will challenge our deeply held beliefs and convictions. The Spirit may take us in a direction that we do not think we want to go. One thing is sure: when we are on the winds of the Spirit, anything can happen.

Anything can happen. Riding the winds of the spirit can be especially hard when we need it the most: when times are tough and we are afraid. It is then that we want to focus, analyze, hypothesize, test strategies, make a decision, make a plan and take action. Oh yes, now that we have a plan, let’s not forget to ask God to bless it and make it happen!

**Can we cut God in on the action
from the ground up?
Not to ask God to bless the plans
we have painstakingly made,
but to start with the question,
God, what *is* our plan? Show us *your*
way, and may your way be *our* way.**

God, grant me the strength and the courage and the conviction and the faithfulness to embody what you have revealed. This is about surrender, isn’t it? This is about putting your whole self in, putting your life in the hands of the living God.

NICODEMUS’ SURRENDER

Back to Nicodemus for a moment. Last we heard from Nicodemus he was still holding his head and saying how can this be? Do you think he ever surrendered? Something must have happened that dark night. There are clear indications as the story unfolds. Some time after that dark night encounter, it was Nicodemus who stood up for Jesus and

demanded that Jesus receive a trial over against the sentiment of those ready to lynch Jesus. Justice failed, and so in the end, it was Nicodemus who was there to help remove Jesus' lifeless body from the cross and tend it with loving and gentle, compassionate care. Something indeed happened to him that dark night. I believe it was surrender, being born anew, and then being borne up and blown about on the winds of the Spirit.

THE OLD WAYS AREN'T WORKING

And now back to us. We live in challenging times, uncertain times, critical and desperately urgent times. Some days, the more we try to understand the more confused we become and truth seems fast becoming a scarce commodity. We live in angry times, and underneath it all, I think we are afraid. Very, very afraid, even right here, in our churches. Looking at the church in America from the perspective of this Day of Pentecost, it is clear that in a span of fifty years, many, many churches have gone from bursting at the seams to struggling for survival. There is trouble in other arenas of life. I think of our society, the economy, disasters, brought on by nature and by human hands. I think about immigration, health care, drug wars in the border towns, jobs, jobs, jobs, wars and rumors of wars, scandals, scams, bankruptcies, home foreclosures and corruption. I think we are very, very afraid. We are standing here like Nicodemus saying, "The old ways aren't working. Tell me what to do!" All the more, the question remains, will we surrender? Will we see the kingdom of God?

WHEN THE TONGUES OF FIRE REST UPON US

I can tell you most assuredly, we will. And I can tell you when it will be. It will be on that day when we let those tongues of fire rest upon us. It will be on the night when under cover of darkness we come to Jesus asking questions, hearing answers and saying, "How can this be?" It will be on the day when we are born anew to a spirit of surrender and say yes to the call to be blown about on the wind of God's spirit. It is an amazing and wonderful thing, an awe-inspiring thing to be captive to the spirit and free of the millstone of self-sufficiency. When the Spirit calls, may we have the courage and strong conviction to offer a resounding, "Yes!" - Firmly bound to the Spirit, forever free. May it be so, this day and each day.



**The Rev. Dale L. Webb
Presbyterian Church of the Roses
2500 Patio Court
Santa Rosa, CA 95405
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