

Acts 2:1-13

John 14:1-27

May 15, 2016

Day of Pentecost

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

WHERE THE HOLY SPIRIT COMES IN

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

What began as an ordinary flight out of LaGuardia Airport in New York City quickly became anything but ordinary. On January 15, 2009, US Airways Flight 1549 struck a flock of Canada geese shortly after take-off. As a result, the two jet engines stopped working.

Captain Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger and First Officer Jeffrey Skiles made the decision to land the Airbus A320 on the Hudson River, after they determined they would not be able to fly to any of the nearby runways.

Because of what came to be known as “The Miracle on the Hudson,” all 150 passengers and five crew members survived. In an article in New York Magazine a couple of weeks after the emergency landing, Captain Sullenberger said, “By constantly being retrained, and going through all kinds of different problems and having to do it calmly and efficiently, that just sticks with you. So when the time comes that something really goes wrong, that’s inherent in you and you just do it.”¹ Five years after “The Miracle on the Hudson,” Captain Sullenberger appeared on “Face the Nation” and “credited the successful emergency landing to discipline that allowed ‘doing our jobs under stressful conditions.’ The Miracle on the Hudson River was less a miracle, Sullenberger said, than an example of pilots improvising in an unanticipated situation while relying on their basic training.”²

Samuel Wells calls what “Sully” Sullenberger did that day over the Hudson River “improvisation.” The captain didn’t make up anything in that moment of crisis. Instead, he relied on skills and training to respond to a totally new and unexpected event. In an interview with the Faith and Leadership program at Duke Divinity School, Dr. Wells said about Captain Sullenberger, “All he can do is fall back on what he’s practiced hundreds of times in his training. So he improvises. He’s never been in the air above New York and had his engines go out before. He’s in a new situation where he has to fall back on the formation that’s taken place over decades. So he looks around, he sees the Hudson River, and he thinks, ‘I can dip down in there. I might hit something, but it’s less of a problem than landing in the middle of Manhattan. I’m going to give it a try.’” He continued, “It’s a classic moment of improvisation. He’s not being spontaneous, clever or witty, but he’s bringing into the moment all of that shaping over a long period of time. That’s the kind of thing I’m talking about, and that’s what churches do when they face ghastly situations.”³

On this Day of Pentecost, let's think about what it might mean for us to be an "improvisational church," not just when we face ghastly situations, but as we try to live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ day in and day out.

Imagine how the disciples must have felt as they sat around the table with Jesus that night. They celebrated the traditional Passover meal, which they must have done many, many times before. No doubt, they could recite the scriptures by heart and go through the motions of the meal by rote. The tradition was ingrained in them. Then Jesus did two very unexpected things.

First, he got up from the table, put a towel around himself, and began to wash the disciples' feet. He told them, "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." (John 13:14-15)

Next, Jesus told them he was about to leave them: "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" (John 14:2)

The master becomes the servant. The Messiah talks about dying. Their friend says he is going away. What are they supposed to do?

The great teacher of preachers, Fred Craddock, asks us to imagine the disciples as children — brothers and sisters — playing on the living room floor. They look up to see Mom and Dad putting on their coats, obviously getting ready to leave. The children have three questions: (1) Where are you going? (2) Can we come with you? (3) Who is going to stay with us while you're gone?

That's a great analogy for this story about Jesus promising the gift of the Holy Spirit to his disciples. (1) Where are you going? "I go to prepare a place for you." (2) Can we come with you? No, "and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." (3) Who is going to stay with us while you're gone? "I will not leave you orphaned . . . I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever."

Among the many things Jesus says the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, will do for the disciples and the church (that includes you and me) is this promise, "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." (John 14:25-26)

What does that have to do with being an "improvisational church"? Jesus tells his disciples that the Holy Spirit will teach them everything and remind them of everything he said to them. As someone has said, when the Holy Spirit teaches us everything, we will be grounded in God's Word. We are reminded of what Jesus said and did. As the church we are called to tell and retell that Good News, to pass on the tradition. But we are also called to discern the meaning of that Good News — what Jesus said and did — in new situations that confront us in our Christian lives and in the church. As Samuel Wells says about improvisation being grounded in the fundamen-

tals and hours of preparation, in a new situation the church has to fall back on the formation that's taken place over decades.

Why do we need that kind of Christian and spiritual formation over the years? Because Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to his followers and sends them/us out with a job to do. "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12)

Did you hear what Jesus said about our calling as his disciples/followers? "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do . . . and, in fact, will do greater works than these." That's incredible! In his physical absence, the church is called and sent out to do what Jesus himself was doing.

If we're honest, we might react the same way the disciples probably reacted when they heard Jesus talk this way. Who? Us? You want us to do what? How are we supposed to do what you've been doing? Are you sure about this, Jesus?

Then we're pretty quick to trot out all of our excuses about why we can't do what Jesus calls us to do, what Jesus himself had been doing. It's too hard! We don't have enough resources! We don't know what we're supposed to do! We've never done that before! We don't want to do what you're asking us to do! And the list can go on and on. But Jesus says, "I will not leave you orphaned . . . the Father will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever."

St. Augustine, the 4th century theologian and church father, has been quoted as saying, "Without God I can't, but without me God won't." Theologian Gordon Fee tells about working his way through college. As part of his job, he had to pick up materials from the desk of a young woman. Sometimes they would have conversations. When she found out he was studying for the ministry, she confronted him with her frustrations about believing in God. "If there is a God up there, out there, somewhere, why doesn't he **say** something, why doesn't he **do** something?"

That's not just the question of a non-believer, Dr. Fee observes. Even the most faithful Christian wonders the same thing in the face of everything that goes on in this world. Dr. Fee says the young woman's question is a lot like Philip's statement to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." (John 14:8)

Dr. Fee writes, "'Show us the Father.' 'Why doesn't God say something, do something?' John's answer is that in Jesus of Nazareth, God's only Son, God has indeed said something and done something. This is good news that needs telling and retelling. That is where we come in; however, the task is not ours alone, and that is where the Holy Spirit comes in."⁴

But what are we supposed to do? Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Earlier that evening, Jesus had told his disciples, "Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also ought to love one another. By

this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:33-35)

But it’s so hard, Jesus! *“I will not leave you orphaned.”* But we don’t know what to do, Jesus! *“The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that have said to you.”* But what you’re asking us to do is so scary and unknown, Jesus! *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.”*

Philip said, “Show us the Father and we will be satisfied.” Jesus answered him, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” We might say, “Show us the Holy Spirit and we will be satisfied.” Jesus might answer us, “Whoever has seen what I have done has seen what the Holy Spirit will do.” Someone has said that “the Holy Spirit brings Jesus’ actions into the present tense.”

The same Spirit who was present at Creation . . . the same Spirit who fell upon the prophets and kings with great power . . . the same Spirit who descended on Jesus at his baptism . . . the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead . . . the same Spirit who came upon the frightened disciples with a sound like the rush of a violent wind and divided tongues as of fire . . . that same Spirit is our Advocate, our Helper, our Comforter, our Companion, our Teacher . . . that same Spirit comes in when and where we need God’s power to do what God calls us to do in the name of Jesus Christ.

On this Day of Pentecost, let us be thankful for God’s Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Risen Christ. For,

In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.

In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God’s new heaven and new earth,
praying, “Come, Lord Jesus!”⁵

Let us strive to be an “improvisational church” — “Built upon a firm foundation, Jesus Christ, the Cornerstone, still the church is called to mission that God’s love shall be made known.”⁶

Let us pray: God of wind and fire, make us bold today to receive your power. Help us to proclaim the wondrous things that you have done and continue to do in our lives. Give us strength and courage to share the Good News of your love and your presence. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

NOTES

¹Robert Kolker, "My Aircraft: Why Sully may be the last of his kind," February 1, 2009 at www.nymag.com.

²Gary Conkling, "Miracle on Your Crisis," January 13, 2014 at www.cfm-online.com.

³Faith and Leadership, "Samuel Wells: Improvising Leadership," March 26, 2016 at www.faihandleadership.com.

⁴Gordon D. Fee, "John 14:8-17," *Interpretation* April 1989, 43/2.

⁵*Book of Confessions*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "A Brief Statement of Faith," Section 10.4.

⁶*Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #280, "Come, O Spirit, Dwell Among Us."