

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
June 8, 2014  
Pentecost Sunday  
The Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 2:1-11  
Psalm 104:25-37  
I Corinthians 12:4-13  
John 14:1-17

The events on the day of Pentecost that Mark read to us earlier are always striking and dramatic for me. The rushing, powerful wind, and the flaming tongues of fire, are images with which it is hard to compete.

And yet, Peter's interpretation of the event (not part of our reading) is almost three times as long as the description of the event itself. Peter quotes the prophet Joel, and says that the community Joel anticipated has now become a reality. The community envisioned by Joel was an inclusive community: it was gender inclusive ("your sons and daughters"), it was age inclusive ("old and young"), and it was ethnically inclusive ("all nations/people").

In quoting Joel, Peter mentions something that I have never given a great deal of attention to in preaching about Pentecost. One of the results of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, says Peter, is that "your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams" (v. 17).

Clearly this seems to imply that the Spirit empowers people for *proclamation*, for bearing witness to Christ as the Messiah. But what about the visions and dreams part?

I must confess to you that any time I hear another Christian – particularly a Christian leader – speak about having a “vision,” I immediately hoist my red flag of concern and skepticism. And the same goes for those who claim to have “had a dream.” That kind of stuff, to me, smacks of *fanaticism*, of a rampant kind of subjective experience that often is not tethered to Scripture and to the life of Jesus.

Such concerns can be quite valid. The names Jim Jones and David Koresh and countless others remind us of this.

And yet, here is Peter, quoting Joel, who says that in the last days God will pour out the Spirit, and young men will see visions, and old men will dream dreams.” And, when I stop to think about it, Scripture has many instances where persons have visionary experiences or are guided and led by a dream. The entire book of Revelation comes to us through what was a visionary-type experience, where John was “caught up” in the Spirit.

And remember Joseph, who was in a conundrum about his situation with Mary and her pregnancy? Remember how he worked through all of that? He was guided in a dream about why Mary was pregnant, and given assurance as to what he was to do.

Remember the wise men from the East, who traveled far and wide to see the newborn king? Herod told them to find the baby and report back to him so that he

could worship him also. But what happened? They were “warned in a dream” not to return to Herod.

I’m not making this stuff up. But at the same time, it’s very hard for me to acknowledge these words of Peter: “your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams.” From the beginning of God’s work in the world, Satan has masterfully attempted to *counterfeit* God’s work, often with great success. And because the giving of the Holy Spirit has been such a vital part of God’s work in the world, there have been numerous counterfeit versions of the Spirit’s ministry.

But I am forced to acknowledge something this morning. The fact that the enemy is skilled at *counterfeiting* the Spirit’s work should not blind me to the fact that there are still *authentic* and *genuine* expressions of the Spirit’s work. The church is the community where the Spirit of God is at work, blessing each member with incredibly unique abilities and gifts.

And one of the results of the Spirit’s presence is the capacity for visionary experience, the capacity to *dream*.

I’m not talking about the kind of dream you have when you’ve had too much pizza and beer. The kind of dreaming I have in mind – where the Spirit is the source of the dream – **is the kind of dream where we see possibilities that we hadn’t seen before.** The kind of dream I’m talking about is the kind where you

learn to challenge assumptions that have built up around you for years, making you doubt whether you can accomplish anything at all.

And among the many things that Pentecost represents, *one of those things should be the permission for God's people to dream*. In fact, Pentecost not only gives us permission to dream; it *sanctions and commissions* us to do so. One of the many ministries of the Holy Spirit is to peel away the scales from our hearts and our eyes, and to help us to see possibilities we had not seen before.

This week, I “dusted off” an old dream. I began to wonder whether it might still be possible to build a Norman tower onto the front of this building, to change the exterior of the property so that people who drive and walk by would instantly be connected to the ancient, historic church.

I began to wonder again whether we could not become a retreat center, a place of study and quiet for laity and professionals alike, a place for people to immerse themselves in the beauty of the Wesleyan and Anglican traditions. A place where persons like Donna Crow and Adam Graham would lead writing workshops, and where music and the arts would be celebrated and cultivated, not as an “add on” to Christian life, but as *essential* to Christian life and worship.

I began to wonder again whether it would be possible to have a Tea Shop, a bookstore, and a library? A vibrant community where classes and workshops were offered, lectures given, poetry recited, and performances enjoyed?

That's just my dream. It's not to say that my dream is the only dream, or the correct dream, for Epworth Chapel on the Green. But if what Peter said long ago on this day is true, then I believe that we have not only been given permission to dream, but that we have been *commissioned* to do so. What might the Spirit be wanting to say to us? What might the Spirit be wanting to show to us, to reveal to us, about *who* we are and all that we might still become?

All of us must answer that together. But I do believe this: I believe that the Holy Spirit is actively present in this place and in this people. And I believe that all things are possible to them that believe. Not all dreams are of the Spirit. But many *are*, especially when those dreams involve reaching hurting and lost people, and modeling for them a different way of being in the world.

On this day when we celebrate the signs and wonders that were present when the church was born, let us also celebrate the miraculous ways that the Spirit is still present with the church, guiding and leading her in the ways of Jesus. Let us give thanks for the Spirit's work here in this body. And let us even dare to take up dreaming once again.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.