

# Catch The Spirit

Acts 2:1-13

## Sunday of Pentecost

23<sup>rd</sup> May 2010

I wonder if you have ever had that experience of catching the spirit. Catching the spirit of a group of people in a way that changes your feelings and emotions. Maybe you've had a stressful week. You don't really want to go to that party, that concert, that ball-game, that church function. But, when you get there, people are so friendly, so upbeat, so excited about the event that somehow it rubs off on you. Your mood lifts, negative feelings dissipate and you are glad you went. Suddenly, you caught the spirit.

Isn't this what happened to the disciples on Pentecost?<sup>1</sup> At that Jewish feast,<sup>2</sup> some 50 days after Passover, when the disciples were all gathered together in one place in Jerusalem? They caught the Spirit. Not just any spirit, of course, but the Spirit of Jesus. The Holy Spirit. There was, we are told, the sound of a rushing wind. Like a tornado. And almost immediately, a tremendous spiritual force flowed into their minds and souls. Yes, the disciples caught the spirit – and they caught it in many different ways.

For instance, these weak and fearful followers caught the spirit of courage. They were filled with a new boldness. Simon Peter,<sup>3</sup> especially. Hardly a few weeks before, this hulking fisherman had been shaken by his denial of Jesus.<sup>4</sup> He was a broken and fearful man. Yet, at Pentecost, a new power took hold of him, enabling him to give strong leadership to the other disciples amidst the persecution they encountered. He caught the spirit of courage and his audacity spread like wildfire to everyone around.

The recent movie *Invictus*,<sup>5</sup> starring Morgan Freeman and Matt Damon, tells of events in South Africa following the election of Nelson Mandela as president in 1994, how he works to dismantle apartheid while trying to “balance black aspirations with white fears” in a time rife with racial tension.

One day, Mandela attends a rugby game, featuring the Springboks, South Africa's national team, and is struck by the fact that the black section of the crowd cheer against their home squad because, for them, the all-white Springboks represent prejudice and apartheid. Strangely, this gives Mandela an idea. Knowing that South Africa is set to host the 1995 Rugby World Cup, he embarks on a very risky course of action that could inflame black-white relationships and ultimately cost him the presidency.

Mandela arranges a meeting with Francois Pienaar, the Springboks captain, and suggests they work together to gain the support of all the South African people for the national rugby team, something that would be a symbol of their new nationhood. Pienaar is very much against this but then Mandela shares with him the poem, “Invictus”<sup>6</sup> – a

poem that inspired Mandela during his time in prison and helped him stand when all he wanted to do was lie down.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, the South African rugby captain catches Mandela's spirit of courage. And others too. It then spreads to the whole rugby team and ultimately to the black and white population who come together to support the Springboks in the great sporting occasion of the Rugby World Cup – which South Africa wins against all odds. Amazingly, it becomes an occasion out of which is born a new sense of unity and a new desire for healing. And all because people caught Mandela's spirit of courage.

Oh, how we today need to catch that self-same spirit of courage in our lives! Courage to overcome our fear. Courage to overcome apathy. Courage to fight intolerance. Courage to bring about reconciliation. Courage to do the right thing. Courage to speak out in the name of Christ. Courage to give others acceptance and understanding. And it just takes one person to catch that God-given spirit of courage and pass it on. Maybe that one person could be you!

Well, the disciples caught the spirit of courage at Pentecost but they also caught the spirit in another way. They caught the spirit of communication. They were given the gift of “speaking with tongues”<sup>7</sup> – not of ranting on in some irrational gibberish, as some denominations practise, but the gift of communicating freely and effortlessly to others the things of their faith. The Holy Spirit gave these uneducated Galileans the tremendous ability to reach across formidable barriers of language and culture to speak the Good News to visitors from every corner of the ancient world who were in Jerusalem to celebrate the religious feast.

Communication is a big challenge for us Christians today for so often it seems that we speak but no-one gets the message. It's like the times when we think we are explaining something rationally to someone but they look back blankly as if they just don't get it. As if we were speaking another language.

Writer, Leonard Sweet, tells of a court case where the prosecuting lawyer was trying to get the witness, a police officer, to confirm that he was actually in uniform at the time of the defendant's arrest. “And how were you attired when you pulled the defendant over?” the lawyer asked. The witness looked at him blankly. It was clear he didn't know what the word “attired” meant. But the prosecutor persisted, “And how were you attired when you pulled the defendant over?” The witness still was puzzled. “Say that again”, he pleaded. “How were you attired when you pulled the defendant over?” barked the prosecuting

attorney. Suddenly a light bulb came on in the officer's head. "Oh, I see what you mean," he exclaimed, "I was travelling on standard issue radial tires!"<sup>8</sup>

Isn't this just how it is for us Christians today? We constantly feel we are talking at cross purposes, talking a different language, with people in our everyday lives. So much so that we can't express to them how much strength and comfort they could find in the Christian faith. No matter what we say, we can't get across to them the depth and richness of spirituality they could experience. Or what a great and positive motivating force Jesus Christ could be in their lives. Or what a powerful force for peace and justice the Man from Nazareth can be in today's world.

Do we need high powered marketing consultants or public relations consultants or spin doctors to get our message across? Maybe we do need to learn from contemporary specialists to help us be heard in a society filled with so many clamouring voices. But let's not overlook the fact that, if we allow the Holy Spirit to work in us as it did in the disciples at Pentecost, we already have at our disposal a great spirit of communication, a spirit that can take our faltering and imperfect words and make them heard in ways we can hardly believe.

We need to catch the spirit of courage. We need to catch the spirit of communication. But we also need to catch the spirit of caring.

One of the great effects of the Pentecost experience was to endow the disciples with a greater love and generosity towards other people, especially those in need. We are told further on in the Book of Acts that, after being filled with the Holy Spirit, the disciples began "to share all things in common".<sup>9</sup>

John Grisham's book *The Street Lawyer*,<sup>10</sup> tells of a young man, Michael Brock, working for a top law firm in Washington. Brock has it all. Handsome, successful, rich. Well on his way to a partnership. But then one day a homeless man protests the eviction of squatters from an apartment complex by taking lawyers hostage in his firm's plush offices

Brock is amazed to find that, far from being upset with this man, he has sympathy for him. Subsequently, he rediscovers a conscience that he had long ago. He decides to leave the big time legal scene for the streets where society's powerless need an advocate for justice. Almost overnight, he turns away from his self-absorption and catches the spirit of caring from others working on the streets. He joins them, putting his legal expertise at the service of those at the bottom end of the socio-economic scale, people he once despised and passed by on the city streets without a thought.

Didn't something similar happen to the disciples after Pentecost? Suddenly, they caught the spirit of caring – most surprisingly because, up to that point, these people had been so inward-looking and so self-absorbed in the

wake of the trauma of the death and resurrection of Jesus and their subsequent fear of persecution.

Maybe this kind of transformation needs to take place in us today. In us who live in a society which has progressively become more self-centred, where the poor and homeless are constantly victimised and criminalised? Do we not desperately need to catch the spirit of caring, to turn us outwards from ourselves? To adopt a self-sacrificial approach to life, like the disciples so long ago, looking first to others' needs before our own?

Today is Pentecost. Let us mark the occasion as a special day when we will allow ourselves to catch the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ. Let's open ourselves up to catch the spirit of courage, the spirit of communication, the spirit of caring. Yes, by our worship, by personal prayer and meditation, by keeping company with God's people, let's catch the Spirit we so greatly need to live as Christians in today's challenging world.

© George A. Turner  
St. Paul's Presbyterian Church  
Peterborough, Ontario

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 2:1-13

<sup>2</sup> Pentecost: One of the highest and holiest days in the Jewish calendar when the covenant made with Noah was renewed.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:14 ff

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 26:69-70; Mark 14:66-68; Luke 22:55-57; John 18:15

<sup>5</sup> *Invictus*, Warner Brothers, 2009

<sup>6</sup> "Invictus", William Ernest Henley (1849 – 1903)

<sup>7</sup> Acts 2:4

<sup>8</sup> Leonard Sweet, "Loud and Clear", ChristianGlobe Networks,

[www.eSermons.com](http://www.eSermons.com)

<sup>9</sup> Acts 2:43 ff; 4:32 ff

<sup>10</sup> John Grisham, *The Street Lawyer*, Doubleday, New York, 1998