

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, May 15, 2016
Rev. Andrew Reid
Romans 8:14-17; John 14:15-17,25- 27
“When the Spirit of the Lord...”

St Luke closes his first volume of the story of the early church with Jesus saying to his followers on the first Easter day: ⁴⁶*Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,* ⁴⁷*and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.* ⁴⁸*You are witnesses of these things.* ⁴⁹*And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’* Luke 24:46-49

Stay here in the city. Tarry ye in the city, in the King James Version. In other words, wait for it. Something is going to happen. Something is about to happen. But not yet. Not just yet. So hold on a bit longer. Wait. You will know when it happens. Power from on high will clothe you. Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in Christ's name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. It will happen. You just have to wait for it.

And Luke goes on in his second volume of the story of the early church to tell of the events of the first Christian Pentecost: the sound like the rush of a violent wind, tongues as of fire appearing, Jesus' followers all being filled with the Holy Spirit and speaking in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability, about God's deeds of power.

They waited. They hung on. And it happened. It just happened. Something strange and different and new. Something unlike anything any of them had experienced before. Something that changed them and transformed them and moved them and sent them out to proclaim the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ, a love that encompassed and included everyone of every race, creed, colour and ethnic origin.

In today's text from St Paul's letter to the Romans, he talks about the Spirit of God as a spirit of adoption, the Spirit that bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.

And in today's Gospel lesson, Jesus talks about the Advocate who is with us for ever, the Spirit of truth who abides with us and in us, who teaches us everything and reminds us of all that he said. It was experiencing that, experiencing the life and the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives as individuals and as a community – that's what changed Jesus' followers and transformed them and moved them and sent them out to proclaim the good news of God's love.

And it all just happened. They didn't call a group together to plan and vision and develop a program to make it happen. They didn't set up a committee – God so loved the world that he didn't send a committee. It all happened when the Spirit of God presented the followers of Jesus with a Gospel opportunity, and at the same time, gave them the ability to make the most of the opportunity.

Has it ever occurred to you how often that has happened in the history of New St James? If not, think about this. It happened 37 years ago when New St James took on the responsibility of sponsoring a family of refugees from Vietnam. Not the result of a coordinated plan, just a Gospel response to human need.

It happened 20 years ago when New St James became involved in the Out of the Cold program, now known as Northern Hospitality. That decision led to the meal that is still being provided by the four participating churches to hungry people in our community. Not the result of a coordinated plan, just a Gospel response to human need.

It happened 15 years ago when a former minister of New St James met some people from Indonesia when he

happened to be visiting New York City. That encounter led to the presence of our Indonesian families today. Not the result of a coordinated plan, just a Gospel response to human need.

It happened eight years ago, when two Karen children, brand new immigrants to Canada, arrived at Vacation Bible Camp with translators. New St James welcomed them with open arms and they stayed. And it continues with the work of the London Ecumenical Refugee Committee today. Not the result of a coordinated plan, just a Gospel response to human need.

It happened seven years ago, when Cathy, Lyn and Pat saw a pile of bricks with grass growing through them, sitting in a remote village in Malawi. They came back and enlisted the help of New St James to raise funds to help the village complete their children's centre. Not the result of a coordinated plan, just a Gospel response to human need.

And it happened this week – actually it happened as I was sitting writing this sermon. I had a phone call from George Rendell, wondering what I thought about the Trustees making a donation towards the rebuilding work in Fort McMurray, not to the Red Cross or Presbyterian World Service and Development, but directly to Faith Presbyterian Church, the congregation of our church in Fort Mac. It might not get the matching funds from the provincial and federal governments, but it will get funds into the hands of people on the ground right away, when they need it right now. Not the result of a coordinated plan, just a Gospel response to human need.

Now, of course, all of these Gospel responses to human need required us to do some coordinated planning, and still do. But my point is that the initial drive to engage with those needs was the result of nothing more and nothing less than the Spirit of God at work in the lives of followers of Jesus, presenting them with a Gospel opportunity, and moving them to make the most of the opportunity.

More and more I find myself thinking that that is the way of the future for the church. Not setting up programs and expecting them to run for ever and ever, amen. Not starting a group then feeling that it has failed if it runs its course and comes to an end. Not measuring success by numbers and size and longevity. Staying nimble and light on our feet and able to respond quickly to change and new opportunities when they present themselves.

Basically following the model of the early church as the Spirit led it to new opportunity and new experience, and coincidentally to new depth and new richness and new vibrancy and new fruitfulness.

This train of thought was sparked not just by today being Pentecost Sunday, but by an article in the weekly email that I receive from the Congregational Consulting Group. The article is headed, Is the Era of the "Program Church" Over?, and John Wimberley writes this:

Everywhere I go, I hear complaints from congregational staff and lay leaders that their programs are not well attended. These leaders seek input about the kinds of programs members want. But then, too often, when programs are offered, attendance ranges between disappointing and none ...

All this leads me to question whether the primary focus of congregations, even multi-celled, "program-sized" congregations, should be on generating programs. Or at least I question whether we should offer the same types of programs we did in the past ...

Surveying a congregation about the kinds of programs they want will not help congregations be effective. Understanding the 21st century—its stresses and opportunities—will make us responsive to the needs of our members. Understanding, rather than criticizing, what our members are doing outside the church with their time, energy and money is crucial. With such an understanding, we can offer them something unique and redemptive.

Congregations in the 21st century are not going to be about generating programs. They are going to be about deepening faith, building community and hands-on mission work.

In other words, doing exactly what the early church concentrated on after the day of Pentecost.