

Spiritual Renewal/Re-NEW-ALL
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Pentecost Sunday 2008

Have you ever experienced something that was dramatically, off-the charts new and different? Have you ever experienced the presence of God in a way that was new for you? Did you try to talk about it? Could you do it without seeming a little odd?

I want to tell you about a time in my life that Something showed up for me in a powerful and dramatic way. I choose to call that Something “God,” and I doubt if you would have noticed it if were sitting right next to me. In fact, people were sitting and standing all around me and my experience still was my own, alone. You see, miracles can be experienced, but not really explained, and your miracle is just that...YOURS. As powerful as it was, others may not have noticed it. But that doesn’t mean it wasn’t profoundly real and profoundly important.

I share this story knowing that it sounds a little odd, and a little less academic than my sharing tends to be; but my hope is that if I share my story, you may wind up embracing your own, and THAT’S the story that has power for you life.

I was 19 years old and I had discovered the Charismatic renewal movement. I’d go to my “high” church on Sunday mornings but on Sunday and Wednesday evenings, I’d go to the Northside Assembly of God. It was college – I tried a lot things. But I’m 19 years old, struggling with the realization that I am gay. Now, this wasn’t really news, but up until this time, I assumed I would out grow it, and as it turns out, I didn’t! I wasn’t a phase, and it wasn’t going away on its own.

I visited this Pentecostal church because I heard that people were sometimes dramatically healed there, and I wanted to be healed of my same-gender attractions. There was of course an altar call, and I went forward. Ministers asked me what I wanted prayer for, and I was too ashamed to name it. I just said, “I can’t talk about it but I want God to fix it.”

Four women in their 70s descended on me like the Green Berets, and after what was a very new way of praying for me, I found myself drifting to the floor in a trance like state. We sometimes call that resting in the spirit...skeptics might call it hypnotism or collective behavior...I don’t care what it was, it was intense. Lying on the floor, eyes closed, experiencing some sort of altered state of consciousness, I heard a voice deep within...that still small voice within that we in the West rarely slow down enough to ever really hear, that voice that I at the time attributed to God said very clearly in words I remember like I heard them just now: NOT EVEN GOD CAN HEAL WHAT IS NOT SICK!!! Whatever the experience was, it changed my life, and that was the very year that I officially and finally “came out” and have never regretted it since.

Each time I have been open to an encounter with the Spirit, something “new” has happened in my life. I experienced something new, something that would change me for the better, something that would give me hope and courage and energy to continue forward. Isn’t that what the story of Pentecost really is?

In the 2nd chapter of Acts, our Pentecost story is illustrated for us. The story tells us,

“1When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. 2And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house [where they were]. 3Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire which parted and came to rest on each one of them. 4And they were ALL filled with the holy

Spirit and began to speak in [new ways] as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim...12They were all astounded and bewildered and said to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others said, scoffing, 'They have had too much new wine.'" (Acts 2.1-4, 12, New American Bible).

They were gathered for Pentecost (which was a Jewish festival), but they experienced it this time in a new way. They experience a driving wind, like the wind that divided the waters of the sea that allowed the Israelites to escape from Egypt . But that wind divided the waters; this is a new experience – this wind fills the entire house and fills every person. This wind doesn't divide; it includes.

They experienced the power of God as tongues of fire. In the Hebrew Bible God appeared to Moses as a burning bush, and later appeared to the Israelites as a cloud of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night. Fire symbolizes God's presence exploding onto the scene of one's life.

Trevor Stewart, from our Board, wanted me to listen to a speech given by Lesley Jordan – you may know him as Beverly Lesley from *Will and Grace*, or as Brother Boy in *Sordid Lives*. He has a powerful story of how he came to a life of sobriety and service, and in his testimony he says that he doesn't believe in a god that does things for us or to us, but he believes in a god that shines through us. We are certainly free to disagree, but I found that image quite beautiful...God as a loving presence, a divine light that empowers us to help ourselves and one another by shining through our lives. That divine light is shining in the story of Pentecost – shining as flames burning in every life.

The story says they were ALL filled with the holy Spirit...the Spirit of wholeness. ALL...not just people who believed certain things, not just the men, not just straight people, not just people of means, not just one nationality...they were ALL filled with the spirit that blew like a wind through the ENTIRE house, causing divine light to shine like flames in EVERY life. They each were offered their miraculous, affirming experience...their encounter with Spirit.

And then, people started talking in new ways...ways that seemed so odd, so crazy, so over the top, so not the way we've always done it, that some people tried to dismiss it as just drunkenness (craziness).

In the story of the Tower of Babel , speaking in new ways separates the people; but in this story, the differences are manifestations of the one spirit, and the new ways of talking are meant to include more kinds of people. The newness is actually empowering, healing, liberating.

They experienced the divine presence, it left no one out...but sometimes an experience can be too new for a closed mind...and we try to put that genie back in the bottle. But the scoffers didn't quench the spirit; they only denied themselves the joy of what She was offering to everyone.

It's a new day; it's always a new day. The past is over. St. Paul told the Corinthians, "Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation; the old is gone; the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5.17).

One of the contributors to the book of Isaiah experienced God as saying, "See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43.19).

We can never go back; we can only go forward. Scoffers will tell us we don't know what we're doing; we're crazy, naïve, mistaken, or stupid. Let'em! Do they really think we haven't

experienced the grace of God, or are they desperately afraid that we have? God is always doing something new if we are open to the experience. Be empowered by the new day, the new moment, the new possibilities, the new movement of the spirit in our lives.

At Sunshine Cathedral, the wind of grace is filling the whole house and every person in it. We are learning to speak in new and inclusive ways, ways that celebrate human diversity, human love, and human potential. Sunshine Cathedral MCC is a church where Pentecost happens because it is a church where the spirit blows everywhere, offering divine empowerment to every person. Not everyone will embrace their divine power, but everyone can. EVERYONE, can. This is the good news. Amen.

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**God's spirit is present in my life.
God's power is present in my life.
God's love is present in my life.
God's gifts are present in my life.
The Spirit is blessing me now.
And I give thanks.
Alleluia!
Amen.**

Dr. Robert Holden reminds us of the joy that the Spirit of Life offers to us all, when he writes, "Unhappiness is not real... unhappiness is not the truth about you. The truth is that no matter how much you've learned to identify with your pain, you are not your illness and you are not your emotions...The real you has no conditions — it is unconditional."