

TEXT: Acts 2:1-21

TOPIC: With Pentecost, the Spirit introduces the first-century church to challenges it will have to face.

SUBJECT: When Pentecost is limited to a once-a-year date on the calendar, it's easy to miss Pentecost's paradoxes.

SUBJECT: The Pentecost Paradox

## PRAYER

One of my favorite TV shows is *Quantum Leap*. I liked the original series but I really love the new series that just completed its second season. The idea of a time traveler, who goes back in the past to change history and put right what once went wrong, fascinates me.

This year's season finale has become one of my all-time favorite episodes of any TV show. One component of that episode is paradox. In the episode the characters together have to change a timeline in the past, so the present would not be negatively impacted. If the timeline was negatively affected, paradox could have the potential to negatively change the lives of everyone who was working together to address a real threat to the project.

When it comes to faith in the crucified and resurrected Christ, and in the Spirit's ability to make it possible for Jews from every nation to speak their own language while simultaneously understanding each other, I think it goes without saying that Pentecost, itself, is a paradox of paradoxes.

So, I could give you a definition of what a paradox is, I had to go to a paradox definition for dummies because I couldn't understand the dictionary definition of it. According to language tool.com, a paradox *is a self-contradictory, seemingly illogical statement or concept. The statement or concept is constructed in a way that forces the audience to think beyond the literal meaning of the words that compose them.*

So, here's an example. Before Jesus was crucified, in John he told his disciples that after he died and was raised three days later, he would send them an Advocate in the Holy Spirit to

remind them of everything he'd taught them and to teach them things they weren't ready to receive before his death, but the disciples didn't get it at first because it was a paradox they could not understand at the time.

So, let's think about that for a moment. In order to send the Advocate to his disciples, Jesus had to first die and be raised three days later before he could. For the disciples, the problem in his statement is that once Jesus says he is going to die, the disciples stop listening, and Jesus' voice becomes like the adults on a Peanuts cartoon. Wah-wah-wah.

Sometimes, I think, we let Pentecost paradoxes affect us the same way. If anything, the Pentecost paradox suggests moving beyond all the ways we build to limit ourselves, whether we're talking about our personal lives or the church. The Pentecost paradox begins when the wind of the Spirit and the tongues of fire filling people with the Spirit, do so, so those filled with the Spirit will do some crazy and incredible things. And that can be a big bite for people to take.

Two of the Pentecost paradoxes suggest that first, the Holy Spirit does not come to solve all our problems or to calm our anxious hearts, but the Spirit comes to cause problems for the sake of healing the world. As Jesus said, "I have not come to destroy the world, but to save it." In this description, healing and salvation are essentially the same thing.

Once the Spirit shows up, the disciples are propelled into serving in the name of Jesus, and that is a clear indicator of the Holy Spirit not solving their problems, but sending them into the problems of the world. The second paradox is that the Spirit doesn't prevent failure, but rather, invites it.

Through the years, I've found that people often learn more from failing than succeeding. Our culture fosters a mindset often pervasive in people's lives; culture tells us that failure is a

negative thing, but really failure is only negative when people let it be. When people embrace the lessons failures have to teach them, they learn that the exact opposite of what culture tells them to believe is actually true. As Jesus said, the truth really does set people free.

For instance, since moving here a year ago, I have discovered I love listening to podcasts. One of my favorite podcasts is *Unlocking Us* by Brene Brown. In one of the last episodes of that particular series, Brene goes to the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, NM, and interviews Father Richard Rohr. In the first of the two episodes, they visit about his book *Breathing Underwater: Spirituality and the 12 Steps*. In it, Rohr suggests the importance of any kind of recovery or healing work requires people to surrender to win, die to live, and give away in order to keep. Each of those are paradoxical.

Those same paradoxes suggest the importance of the same thing happening in the church and in the lives of Christ followers. Surrendering to win, dying to live, and giving to keep are like the paradoxes the Spirit brought at Pentecost. Doing so, throws churches into lost causes by siding with the most vulnerable, and by taking great risks and daring to take great adventures.

As Christ followers, our goal is to listen all the way through, so we can follow all the way through. As Christ followers, we cannot be like the disciples were before Pentecost – huddled together in a locked room afraid of real or perceived enemies. As Christ followers, it's time to quit worrying about whether we are successful, so we can start asking ourselves whether we are faithful.

In the cross of Christ, we see God's strength mediated through suffering, God's victory achieved through defeat, and new life pledged and provided in death.

Talk about paradoxes.

So, just as the Pentecost paradox sparked the disciples into becoming the church after Jesus' death and resurrection, the Spirit blows among us today to do the same thing because like the disciples, people and churches will not really discover how God can work through their lives until people and churches give themselves away. And people and churches give themselves away by looking around their neighborhood and their mission field asking, "Who needs us?" and "What can we do with our resources to share God's love with the part of the world we live in?" When Pentecost isn't a once-a-year Sunday but an everyday event, that's when followers give themselves away. When Pentecost isn't a thing that happened 2,000 years ago but something that happens anytime, all the time, and every day, people realize the Pentecost paradoxes shapes people's lives, particularly ours.

The Pentecost paradox has everything to do with living into an expression of the healing, grace, and love God has poured into the world for all time, and experience it in ways the wind blows and the tongues of fire burn. The Pentecost paradox is an invitation to take risks and dare to go on great adventures not because we know they will bring immediate results, but because we trusted in God's good promises, and made a positive difference.

After all, the Pentecost paradox should always remind us that in the Spirit, Christ is with us and among us, and because that's the case, may we remember that resurrection only and always follows crucifixion.

In the name of the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – one God in perfect community. Amen.