

“The New Wine of The Spirit”
(A Sermon for Confirmation on the Day of Pentecost 2005)

As I am writing this sermon, I am listening to the Holy Spirit at work. More precisely, I am listening to the Oscar Peterson trio demonstrate the essence of jazz with Duke Ellington’s “C-Jam Blues.” A simple two-note theme played with impeccable timing for sixteen measures, driven by Ed Thigpen’s drums, with the walking bass of Ray Brown culminates in Oscar Peterson’s fistful of notes, rich in blues harmony, and swinging perfectly! Like all great jazz players, this trio has taken a set piece and transformed it into something unique and never to be repeated. If they had played it immediately after finishing this recording, they would have played it differently!

I listen to a lot of jazz. The newness, the unexpectedness, the swing achieved by playing notes a little behind or in front of the beat, the syncopation, the harmonies, the improvisational creativeness – to me it’s a metaphor for the Holy Spirit at work! It could be the percussive primitive-ness of old-style Dixieland; it could be the collective swing of Count Basie’s big band, or the restrained cool of the Modern Jazz Quartet (my all time favourite group!) - all seem to me to be truly “inspired” in the fullest sense of that word: *having breathed in the Spirit*.

It seems to me that jazz is one of those human endeavours that exemplify that which the church has been trying for centuries to explain about the workings of the Holy Spirit, whose working even Jesus could not completely explain. He compared the freedom and improvisational nature of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life to the wind that, in Jesus’ words,

*“blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it,
 but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.
 So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8)*

Bix Beiderbecke, the legendary trumpeter of the 1920’s saw the same unpredictability in jazz and told a young fan: “One of the things I like about jazz, kid, is I don’t know what’s going to happen next. Do you?”

One of the exiting aspects of this day is that we do not know what is going to happen next in the lives of these five young people. They have their own hopes and dreams about their lives. And I am sure that their parents and family for many years have nurtured hopes and dreams of their childrens’ lives. But in the end, God’s Spirit will lead Katrina, Ērika, Markuss, Līga and Jacqueline where and how it will, - sometimes dramatically and openly, at times quietly and mysteriously.

And if we are serious about our own lives and our own faith, then we must admit, that we don’t know what is going to happen next in our lives either. The Spirit of God will move us in completely unexpected ways, the rhythm of our life may become wildly syncopated and the harmonies sound refreshingly new. We may imbibe of the new wine of the Spirit and seem to all the rest of the world to be out of our minds. But The Holy Spirit of God, as Jesus said, “blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from

or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." The results can be surprising.

That is what happened at the first outpouring of the Spirit recorded in the Book of Acts. A despairing, weakened and aimless band of disciples suddenly become inspired through the Holy Spirit to be courageous, forceful and purposeful.

This comes as such a surprise to the gathered crowd of onlookers, that some of them can only explain this by saying that the disciples must be drunk! *"They are filled with new wine."*(Acts 2:13) Peter, one of the disciples, defends them against this charge, saying that *"these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning."* (2:15)

But I think that the sarcastic critics were more to the point than they knew. The disciples were indeed consumed by something completely new, something surprising and wonderful – something similar to a great wine!

Earlier in his teaching, Jesus himself had compared the new life in the Spirit with new wine. He stated that the new life he offered could not be lived within old ideas and old beliefs. His teaching was like a new wine that could only be put in a *fresh wineskin* – into a new context, a new understanding of life.

"No one puts new wine into old wineskins;" he said, "otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins." (Mark 2:22)

So often we hope that younger generations will assume the values and ideals of the preceding generation. Immigrant cultures such as ours are particularly susceptible to that kind of assumption. And to a certain degree, that is good and desirable, for there are enduring values that bind a culture and community together. However, we cannot expect that these five young people – each endowed with unique abilities and ideas – will be cloned copies of a previous generation, devoid of newness and lacking in creativity.

Their life is the new wine of the Spirit, and it needs to be put in a fresh wineskin, a new life of new ideas and new possibilities. In the metaphor of jazz, they may have to play the old standard tunes, but they will be playing them in a new way of fresh rhythms, richer harmonies, and unexpected melodies. As Charlie Parker, one of the giants of jazz, said:

"Music is your own experience, your own thoughts, your wisdom. If you don't live it, it won't come out of your horn. They teach you there's a boundary line to music. But, man, there's no boundary line to art."

After all, as Jesus said, *"the Spirit blows where it chooses."* There is no boundary to the working of God's Holy Spirit in the lives of His people! There is no boundary to the art of life!

But all too often we do set boundaries to our thinking. We close our minds and narrow our vision and try to confine God's Spirit to our own devices and desires. Often our own fears and doubts create boundaries; often it is the fears and doubts and opposition of others that set our boundaries.

Early in his ministry, Jesus came to his home town of Nazareth and in the worship service of the community proclaimed that God's Spirit had given him a new mission:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor." Jesus announced,
"He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free, ... (Luke 4:18)*

And when Jesus said that this liberating and life-giving work was to begin right here, right now, he was met with immediate and violent opposition. Luke tells us that when the people heard this, they *were filled with rage.* ²⁹ *They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. (Luke 4:28-29).*

Sometimes the Spirit leads us beyond the boundaries of what we, or others, consider acceptable or popular. But to be true to ourselves, and to be truly people of God, we have to let His Spirit lead us wherever it will. The others will eventually catch up. Theolonious Monk, the *avant-garde* pianist of modern jazz gave this advice to a young player:

"I say, 'Play your own way. Don't play what the public wants. You play what you want and let the public pick up on what you're doing - even if it does take them fifteen, twenty years'."

At the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentacost, the critics of the apostles could not "pick up" on what they were doing. Only later, after Peter's explanation, did some of the people realize what had happened and opened their lives to the wonder and creativity of God's Spirit. Others never did and their lives continued as before – playing the same old tune in the same old way, drinking the "plonk" of the mundane, instead of the new wine of the Spirit.

So, Katrīna, Ērika, Markuss, Līga, and Jacqueline – drink deeply of the new wine of the Spirit, let it go to your head, play the song of your life in your own way, let God's Spirit move you beyond the boundaries of the safe and ordinary and let it take you into the new life of wonder, grace and God's boundless love.
Amen.

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