

“...But God Is Better”
Acts 2:37-47/Joel 2:28-32
FPC/Pentecost Sunday/May 23, 2010
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I. Introduction

Last August 19th in Minneapolis, as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was holding their convention, five tornados touched down in various parts of the city. The roof of the convention center was damaged, as was the steeple of the Central Lutheran Church. The next day Pastor John Piper publically announced in Minneapolis on the evening news that the tornados were a sign of God’s providence, and a warning to the Lutheran convention to not allow gays and lesbians to be approved for ordained ministry.

The next day Minneapolis Pastor Greg Boyd challenged Piper’s theology and public announcement, noting that “in the fallen world in which we live, towers sometimes randomly fall; bridges sometimes randomly collapse; and tornadoes sometimes randomly do property damage – even to churches. And what’s more, most tornados happen in the Bible belt, the region least tolerant toward homosexuals, and that the fewest strike in the Northeast, where there is the most tolerance.” (Christian Century, September 22, 2009, p. 8, and www.newleaven.com/2009/08/21) Pastor John Piper did not respond.

And I recently read about the Lighthouse Church of All Nations in Alsip, Illinois. At each of the three Sunday morning services Pastor Dan Willis draws the number of a seat in the sanctuary from a bag. The person sitting in that seat gets a cash prize of \$250 or \$500. Rev. Willis admits it’s a gimmick to get more people to the church. Since the drawings began weekly attendance at the Lighthouse Church of All Nations has surged from 1600 to 2500. (Christian Century, December 1, 2009, p. 8)

Today we live in a culture that is increasingly non-Christian. Today we live in a time when the church is increasingly irrelevant to the lives of people. Today we live in communities in which people are looking for life and hope and some type of meaning, while at the same the ways and voices of the church are increasingly marginalized. In this time and place can’t we do any better than thin theology on God’s providence, and judgmental opinions? And in this time and place can’t we do any better than a lottery and cash prizes. The answer is on this Pentecost Sunday, the first Pentecost Sunday, and every Pentecost Sunday is; “No, not really. On our own we can’t be better.....but God is better.”

II. Stories: But God Is Better

I think of the Rural Presbyterian Church in northern India. It’s a small church made up of the indigenous “dalit” (or “untouchable” people). The “dalit” are victims of

the Hindu caste system. Though proclaimed to be illegal in India, the caste system still thrives in the culture, and crushes the poorest of people. By Hindu law the children of the “dalits” are given derogatory names at birth, such as “stupid,” “ugly,” “worthless,” and much worse. But at the Rural Presbyterian Church an amazing thing happens. When a “dalit” comes to faith in Jesus Christ the church has a renaming ceremony for that person in light of God’s grace and mercy. The new identity as a “child of God” comes with a new name, names such as “Joy,” “Grace,” and “Hope.” (Labberton, The Dangerous Act of Worship, p. 121) That Presbyterian Church could not be better on its own. But on Pentecost we are reminded that God is better....and God makes the church better.

And I remember a story that I think of often, and tell every once in a while. I don’t know if it’s true, but I would like to believe it’s true. And I would like to believe it’s true here. It was Sunday morning, and the tenor in the small choir of the church was to sing a solo. As he started to sing he just didn’t feel right, and it showed as he struggled through the first verse. But an amazing thing then happened. By the second verse the congregation had found the song in their hymnals, and they were singing along.....carrying the tenor. By the third verse the tenor found his voice and range, and began to sing out with confidence. And by the fourth verse the congregation put away their hymnals and listened to the beautiful voice of the tenor. After worship a second wonder happened. No one complained about the tenor’s struggle, but everyone said they had never heard the tenor sound better. On its own that small congregation could not be that caring and that gracious.....it could not be better. But on Pentecost we are reminded that God is better....and God makes the church better.

In his book, Blue Like Jazz, Donald Miller tells a story about his church. They were a small group of ten meeting in a house until they had a Pentecost experience. Miller writes this:

“One night our pastor Rick showed up. He said he had become convicted about losing touch with people who didn’t know Jesus. Rick asked what we thought about really loving people different than us. We told him yes, but we really didn’t know what that meant. Rick said he thought it meant we should live missional lives, that we should intentionally befriend people who are different than us. I didn’t like the sound of that, to be honest. I didn’t want to befriend someone just to trick them into going to my church. Rick said that wasn’t what he meant. He said he was talking about loving people just because they exist; homeless people, Gothic people, gays, and racial minorities. I liked the sound of that, just loving people to love them, because God loved them. And if the topic of church came up, I could tell them about our church. But until then, who cared. So we started praying every week that God would teach us to live missional lives, to notice people who needed to be loved.

“Lots of people started coming to the church after that. I don’t know why, honestly, except that we all agreed we would love people and be nice to them and listen and make friends. As we grew we had to move to another building and then another one after that. Soon we had to go to two services. It all started when we started to love people who didn’t know Jesus.” (p. 135)

Loving, caring, making friends with people who don’t know Jesus.....that church could not be better on its own. It started as ten people in a living room. But God is better.....and God makes the church better.

III. Text and Brief Exegesis

These are modern Pentecost stories; communities of faith in Jesus who can’t be better on their own, but who are made better by the grace and power of God’s Holy Spirit. The first Pentecost story is in Acts 2. It’s the pattern for all the Pentecost stories that have followed.

The disciples and other followers of Jesus who had misunderstood, doubted, denied and fled from Jesus at the cross are now gathered in a room. They have been with the risen Lord, but they are still secretly, quietly hiding in Jerusalem. They have not been better on their own. The risen Jesus told them to wait for power from God.....and so they wait.

On Pentecost the power comes. Described as wind and fire the Holy Spirit of God comes. The followers of Jesus who once doubted, denied and fled, now tell about Jesus boldly and publically. When questions come up, Peter tells about Jesus, and that the coming and power of the Holy Spirit is a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophet Joel; that in the end of days the Holy Spirit has come to all people. The Spirit is a sign and power of the end time kingdom of God. The time is now. And the crucified and risen Jesus Christ is the king of this kingdom.

Read Acts 2:37-47.

Repent, be baptized, be forgiven and receive the gift and power of the Spirit.....those who don’t know Jesus are invited to belief, and to become part of this end time kingdom of God. A surprising number of people respond. They listen to the Apostles’ stories about Jesus and their teaching from the Old Testament. They meet together and shared meals. They meet together for prayer daily in their homes, and at the temple. And this end time community of God empowered with the Holy Spirit becomes a contrast community to the ways of life around them. There are miracles and great generosity. They love each other, and love people who don’t know Jesus.....and there’s something special happening. People all around them see it, and are amazed.

They could not be better on their own. But God is better, and by the gift of the Holy Spirit God makes their community better. The church, at its best, begins.

IV. Final Reflection

We are not better on our own. We are small, selfish and fearful. On our own we reflect the ways of the culture around us. But God is better.....and by the gift of the Holy Spirit God makes us better. We become, at our best, a contrast community to the ways around us.....the end time kingdom of God where Jesus reigns. And we become our own Pentecost stories.