

A Community of Unstoppable Impact

Acts 2:1-21

Introduction

In 1926, a very wealthy lawyer from Toronto died. His name was Charles Vance Millar. Almost 100 years later, his will is still considered to be one of the strangest such documents ever written. Mr. Millar was a bachelor who had a sense of humor that made it pretty clear why he was a bachelor. Since he had no close heirs, he decided to divide his sizeable fortune in a way that amused him and intentionally created problems for those who inherited it.

For example:

- He left a number of shares of stock in Canadian horse track to two prominent politicians who were openly opposed to racetrack betting.
- He bequeathed shares in the O'Keefe Brewery Company (a Catholic-owned beer manufacturer) to every Protestant minister in the city of Toronto.
- But his most famous bequest – one that lived far beyond his own life span – was this: He left the bulk of his fortune to the woman living in the city of Toronto who would give birth to the most children in the ten years immediately following his death. He called this “the Great Stork Derby.”

Keep in mind Mr. Millar died in 1926, just as the world was entering the Great Depression. People were already struggling to meet their most basic needs.

Ten years later four women came forward to claim that portion of the estate. Each of them had given birth to nine children in that ten year span. The courts declared them all winners and divided the estate among them. Each inherited an amount that would be the equivalent of \$2.5 million dollars in today's economy. The last of those 36 children born during the Great Stork Derby died just a few years ago. Such was his legacy.

When Jesus left this earth – an event we celebrated last week on Ascension Sunday -- He left something even more valuable to His followers. He bequeathed to them the Holy Spirit. Today on this Pentecost Sunday we celebrate the coming of that Holy Spirit and with its arrival the formation of the church. And what an impact the Spirit's arrival made!

In the language of this series of sermons, the arrival of the Holy Spirit created an...

UNSTOPPABLE IMPACT

Just look what happened!

#1: LIVES WERE TRANSFORMED

Because of the arrival of the Holy Spirit lives were transformed.

I want to show you two verses of Scripture here. The first describes events on Easter evening. You will find it in verses that were read in worship six weeks ago:

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them ... (John 20:19)

Now, compare that to these verses. They describe the events of Pentecost, 50 days after the first one:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place... All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:1, 4)

In less than two months' time – 50 days to be exact – these followers of Jesus went from hiding behind locked doors lest the Jewish leaders locate them ... to standing openly in the marketplace on one of the busiest days of the year, proclaiming the Gospel to every person who would listen.

On Easter their mindset was "Oh, no! They might find us." On Pentecost, it was "Here we are!"

What was the difference? Their lives had been transformed by the coming of the Holy Spirit.

In my first draft of this sermon, I labeled this first point as "Lives were changed." But as I thought about it, the word "changed" wasn't dramatic enough to describe what happened. These lives were transformed. Big difference.

- I came to that conclusion earlier this week when I saw a Facebook picture of my 16 month old grandson Mason. All of the sudden I thought he looked like a little boy! When did that happen?
- But then I scrolled back and looked at a number of his pictures over these past 16 months. I noticed in each one, little by little, those changes had started to occur.
- Over the course of 16 months those changes happened. They were so minor and gradual that I missed them in real time. Over time they added up.

What happened to the disciples on this Pentecost Sunday was nothing like that! In a moment, with the rushing of the wind into the room where they were gathered, these followers were transformed! It only took an instant!

The Bible tells us that when we come to faith in Jesus Christ we instantly are transformed into something brand new.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

We go from sinner to saint, from bound for hell to bound for heaven. The hymn writer proclaims Once I was lost, but now I am found!

Now, I will gladly concede the point that over time as I continue to walk with Jesus, God gradually polishes off a number of rough edges. And those changes can be very gradual and hard to notice. It is a "both/and." But don't miss this point, when the Holy Spirit touches you, things are different now.

I'm not what I want to be, but thank God I'm not what I used to be.

#2: THE WORLD BEGAN TO WONDER

So dramatic was this transformation in the lives of these disciples that the world began to wonder what was going on. Verse 6 tells us:

When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. (Acts 2:6)

The crowds had never seen anything like this before. They were "bewildered" by it all. Their past experiences provided them with only one plausible explanation:

They have had too much wine. (Acts 2:13)

When the Holy Spirit begins to move in the lives of God's people, the world doesn't know how to explain. It makes no sense.

- How do you explain 120 people creating such a public evangelistic commotion when only a few days ago they were fearful of being discovered?
- How do you explain the boldness of Peter's sermon – this same Peter who cowered when little girl recognized him on the night of Jesus' trial?
- These men were fisherman, and tax collectors and insurrectionists, not public speakers or theologians. They had no education. Where did they learn all these different languages?

Bring it to today. The world is still confused.

- Why do you attend a worship service every Sunday morning?
- Why do you give money to that church?
- Do you really believe that a God hears you when you pray? And actually answers you?
- Do you really believe you will go to heaven when you die?
- Or how about this one: How can you forgive him after what he did to you?

Never be afraid of those questions! No! Invite them! Because those questions show that the Holy Spirit who is in you is at work in them.

#3: PEOPLE WERE BEING SAVED

Here is a verse beyond the passage we read this morning.

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37)

Cut to the heart. In other contexts we would say the crowd was under conviction. God was breaking through. We know that was the case because of verse 41:

Those who accepted (Peter's) message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. (Acts 2:41)

Dr. John Geddie was a Presbyterian missionary. He went to a small island in the South Pacific in 1848 and served God there for 24 years. There is a small plaque outside the church he established there that reads like this:

When he landed in 1848, there were no Christians.
When he left, in 1872, there were no heathen.

Can one man do that? No. Can the Holy Spirit do that through one man? Yes. And if the Holy Spirit can do it through one man, imagine the impact a church would have if it operated fully in the power of the Holy Spirit. Why ... it would be UNSTOPPABLE.

APPLICATION

This series of sermons has been based entirely in the book of Acts. One of the writers who heavily influenced my early ministry wrote these words. I recently rediscovered them:

Acts is a book about the church. Not the church as it often is, but the church as it originally was. The church as it can be. And yes, the church as it *must* be again.

What sort of image does the word *church* bring to your mind? Does it suggest to you: A snooty religious country club, bound by strange, almost secret rituals, traditions, and jargon? A political action group, waging war on behalf of a political agenda (of either the left or the right)? A waiting room, where people wait expectantly but rather passively for the next bus to heaven? A collection of hypocrites who care more about expensive pipe organs, stained glass, and stone buildings than they do about the hurting and hungry in the world? A place where "religious junkies" gather to get their weekend "feel-good fix" so they can get through another week? A collection of sanctimonious kill-joys who want to legislate morality for the rest of the world?

Let's be honest: The church has been all of these things at one time or another. Again and again, it has justified every bitter charge, every gripe and criticism that was ever leveled against it by angry atheists and disillusioned agnostics.

Yet--despite all its obvious flaws, weaknesses, hypocrisies, sins, and excesses--the church has been the most powerful force for good on the face of the earth, century after century, from the time of the apostles right up to this present moment. It has been light in the midst of the blackest darkness. It has been salt--both a preservative and a delightful seasoning--in a corruption-prone, unsavory society.

And in my words now ... The church, operating as Jesus intended it to be, remains UNSTOPPABLE.

There is an old hymn that has echoed in my head throughout the seven sermons I have prepared in this series. These are the words I learned to sing:

Rise up, O Church of God! Have done with lesser things;
Give heart and mind and soul and strength To serve the King of kings.

Lift high the cross of Christ! Tread where His feet have trod;
As foll'wers of the Son of Man, Rise up, O Church of God!

That's my prayer for this congregation and for Christian congregations around the globe. Be done with lesser things and rise up to be the church!

Amen.