

“Let’s Get Crazy!”

Sermon: Year B, Feast of Pentecost

Texts: Acts 2:1–21, Romans 8:22–27

Preached: May 20, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Come, Holy Spirit! Come! AMEN

How many of you got up early yesterday morning to watch the royal wedding, or spent the morning watching the endless replays of the event? I have to say that, even though I’m an occasional royal-watcher, I forgot completely to get up early or to record the festivities. To be completely honest, I had forgotten about the whole thing. When I signed on to social media, though, it was filled with friends’ comments about the wedding. And trending among my friends—which will tell you something about the folks I hang out with—were rave comments about the sermon delivered by the Most Rev. William Curry, Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church, USA. Being a church nerd, I couldn’t wait until the video had been posted so I could see it for myself.

If you didn’t hear this sermon, I urge you to go home this afternoon and seek it out. You do not have to be a church nerd to appreciate it. It was a strong message on the power of love, quoting Martin Luther King and the Apostle Paul and Jesus. It was also a prophetic and challenging message about the need to use our resources and our personal power for the good of neighbor and of society, indeed the good of the whole world. It spoke Good News in ways that both confronted and uplifted—what we Lutherans would call a good blend of Law and Gospel. There was great Good News about this amazing power of love available to us to use for good, yet it also held up a mirror to us, compelling us to consider our lives in light of the ways we miss that mark. And the whole thing was delivered there in one of the most magnificent, upper-crust of upper-crust stiff-upper-lip British churches, jammed with some of the wealthiest, most powerful people in the world. It was not your typical wedding sermon, particularly in that setting. And by the way, preachers generally hate having to give wedding sermons, because as one of my pastor friends put it, “Nobody wants to sit through a sermon at a wedding, they just want to get the vows said and get to the party.”

The Anglican church is known for its love of beautiful ritual and, in many expressions of that church, for its love of formality and orderly, dignified worship. And the setting for that service yesterday was as formal as it gets, pretty much. Yet Bp. Curry, while imminently dignified, brought to his homily the style of the great African-American preaching tradition, with humor, and repetition, and appeals to the listeners, and wide sweeps of the vocal range. As fascinating to me as the sermon itself, though, was to watch the reaction of those in attendance, for whom this style of preaching was far from what they were accustomed to, far from what they expected. As the cameras panned the assembly, the looks on people’s faces were a study in amazement or wonder, along with what some refer to as “church giggles.” Some looked uncomfortable. Some looked as though they were thinking, “This is crazy. This is so inappropriate.”

Let’s face it, we all have those moments of encountering something new and different and thinking, “That is crazy.” We all have experienced that instantaneous resistance, that reserve, that initial rejection because something is not what we’re used to, or because something is so wild and new that we’re afraid of getting caught up in the craziness. And honestly, I think that’s human nature. It’s a protective mechanism. We have our comfort zones, and we really don’t want to be moved out of them.

I think that’s what is happening in that passage we heard from Acts. The promised Holy Spirit has finally arrived, and boy, has the Spirit arrived! A mighty, rushing wind has blown open the doors and windows of the place where the disciples have been huddling in darkness and fearful hush, exposing them to the world as it swarms around what has been an island of safety. Power like fire has descended on these timid disciples, energizing them in ways they have never experienced before. And that breath of God fills their lungs, and that fire of the Spirit warms their hearts to the boiling point, and they begin to speak loudly to the curious crowd that begins to form as people come to find out what’s going on here, and the disciples proclaim God’s mighty acts, speaking in languages they’ve never learned, so that everyone in the crowd is hearing this message in their own mother tongue. It was astonishing. The disciples themselves were amazed. Some heard it and were intrigued, touched. And others heard it and reacted as I think I might: “These folks are drunk. These people are crazy.”

This simple wasn’t the way it was done. Religion then, as it is now, was for many people a largely private affair. It was something that shaped ethical behavior, something that might give you personal satisfaction and comfort and a sense of awe, but it was not something that made you jump up and want to tell people about it. Religion, then as now, was often more about maintaining a nice, steady status quo.

So suddenly here are these followers of Jesus standing up in the street, leaning out the windows, maybe, saying and doing things with so much excitement that people thought they were crazy drunk. Most of us would think the same, if we're being honest. We tend to like our faith as a quiet matter, something that is between us and God, something that is experienced in dignity and calm. We do not want people to think of us as crazy.

Yet we follow Jesus, who from the beginning of his ministry said and did crazy things. As Bp. Curry pointed out in another sermon he delivered a few years ago, even Jesus' family thought he was crazy. The Gospel of Mark records that, right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, he went home to Nazareth, and his family got so concerned about him that they come looking for him, ready to put him in restraints because, as the New Revised Standard Version puts it, "people were saying, 'He's gone out of his mind!'" The Common English Bible says, "They came to take control of him." And that's what happened throughout Jesus' life on earth. He said and did crazy things. He talked about a world where the last would be first, where the mighty would be cast down from their thrones, where the poor would inherit the earth, where the one who would be greatest would be the slave of all, where the cycle of violence would be ended by peaceful resistance, where God would lift up the weak, where all would dwell in safety, where the rules that governed and controlled the expression of faith would be unimportant, where all that would matter is the law of love for God and love for neighbor, where there would no longer be a need for intermediaries between humans and God because everyone would have direct access to God's love and mercy and forgiveness and power. It was crazy talk! His was talk that caused scorn, actions that caused scandal.

We really prefer "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." We like to think of Jesus with uplifted face with beams of heavenly light shining on his hair. We get a bit uncomfortable, though, with the Jesus who thunders in rage against the powers of injustice and illness and hypocrisy, the Jesus who demands that we give up everything to give it to the poor. And we often prefer that God the Father be the aloof, distant God of heaven, a somewhat sleepy God who sits enthroned far, far away from us, who wakes briefly on Sunday mornings when we come to worship. We invoke the coming of the Spirit in our worship, but when God comes to us as Spirit, with wind and fire, shaking things up, turning things on end, changing things, we start to squirm. It's craziness, dangerous craziness. It's outside our comfort zone. Why, if we get caught up in the Spirit, someone might think *we're* crazy!

But listen to this quote from Annie Dillard: "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

Sisters and brothers, we are indeed playing with fire here. The Spirit of God blows where it will, and we simply cannot control it, as much as we would like to contain it and keep it to ourselves as we huddle behind closed doors. The church is called not simply to worship, but to act boldly and surprisingly in the world. The Spirit of God wants to blow open these doors, to drive us out into the streets to say and do crazy things. We are called and empowered to confront the powers of evil and oppression, and to turn things upside down, to behave counterculturally. We are called to lift up the lowly, to refuse to meet evil with evil, to feed the hungry and heal the sick, to give shelter to the homeless, to welcome the outcast and the stranger, to declare emphatically that our culture's love of material goods and its false sense of security found in our idolatry of weapons are contrary to the Good News. We are called by the Spirit to move out of our comfort zones, and to live in hope in a world that says there is no hope. We are called and empowered by the Spirit to join in the groaning labor pains of this new creation. We are called and empowered by the Spirit to live with joy and enthusiastic urgency. We are called and led by the Spirit to live in such a way that people will call us crazy.

What would this congregation be like if, when we pray for the Spirit to come among us and to stir us and renew us, we genuinely opened ourselves to doing something totally new and unexpected, and, well... crazy?
AMEN