

Eric Dupee

May 28, 2023, Acts 2:1-21, Pentecost "The Spirit Poured Out"

The world of music lost a legend last week. Tina Turner, "Queen of Rock 'n' Roll," died at the age of 83 years old. Every news and entertainment program carried the story. However, I noticed something about the coverage. I noticed most of the conversation did not center around her hit songs.

They recalled the favorites: Proud Mary, Private Dancer, What's Love Got to Do with It? I noticed most of the conversation centered, not on the songs, but on the fact that she transcended social barriers. For example, at a time when it was not common to do so, she spoke openly about the abuse she suffered at the hands of her husband. One commentator believed, in so doing, Turner showed women it can be possible to leave an abusive relationship and thrive.

She also defied age barriers. When I was watching MTV, back in the 1980s, she was old by MTV standards. She was in her 40's. Even so, she was wildly popular with that audience. Tina Turner overcame social distinctions based on race, gender, and age in order to become a household name.

I think her story is one of many illustrating how God operates. We don't know where talent hides. We don't know where a great idea might be born. When the Holy Spirit is poured out, it defies the social boundaries that govern our lives. It spills out all over everyone.

That's what the Pentecost story in the book of Acts shows. It took place during what is known in English as the Feast of Weeks. This major holiday, that marked the wheat harvest, was one of three festivals in which the Jewish people would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

So, people from every nation were gathered in the Holy City. It was no small task for Terrie, this morning, just to pronounce the names of all the places they came from. Imagine the communication barriers in Jerusalem among all those different people.

Here's what I love about the story. That language barrier was overcome by the people no one would have expected. In Israel, Galilee was the furthest region from Jerusalem.

Galileans were country folk. They had a very distinctive accent which was hard to understand. In fact, they were ridiculed for the way they spoke. That is to say, they were known, specifically, for their lack of communication skills.

On the day of Pentecost, these Galileans were locked up in a house. The Holy Spirit rested upon each one and they were given the ability to speak in other languages. The Spirit endowed the people least expected to speak effectively with the ability to communicate miraculously.

It wasn't the religious experts, the Scribes or the Pharisees. It wasn't the cultural elite. It wasn't the highly educated. It was the Galileans who boldly declared God's deeds of power among the people. When the Holy Spirit is poured out, it ignores social distinctions.

The story could have ended there, but we should note how disorienting this was. Everyone was amazed and perplexed. They wondered what it meant. Apparently, some suggested the disciples had a little too much wine. It was hard to let go of expectations based on social distinctions.

I once knew a woman who directed the choir at a predominantly black church in Philadelphia. A predominantly white church in the suburbs invited the choir to sing at their church. They would mark Black History Month with authentic gospel music. The director didn't want to be pigeonholed, so she taught the choir a classical piece and they sang it in Latin. That's a Pentecost story!

We don't even realize how engrained social distinctions are. In his New Testament letters, the Apostle Paul claimed they were completely overcome. He wrote, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

However, he also wrote, "As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says." If there is no longer male or female, why are women required to remain silent in the church?

A similar thing happened among our founding fathers. Many who wrote and signed the Declaration of Independence, asserting that "all men are created equal," were slave owners. We don't even realize the extent to which social barriers govern our society and our lives.

This is one reason I love the congregational way. In a congregational church meeting, each and every person is to have an opportunity to speak, because the Holy Spirit makes no distinctions regarding age, gender, physical ability, sexual orientation, wealth, or the length of time someone has been a member. When the Holy Spirit is poured out, it's a great equalizer.

Today, we still deal with those distinctions. It's hard for women to break into male-dominated professions. It's hard for men to step into roles traditionally held by women. We know young boys are, consciously or unconsciously, steered towards certain activities and young girls are steered towards others. People make assumptions about seniors. Maybe they don't have the memory or the clarity of thought required to do certain things.

Our conceptions of what is beautiful and not beautiful are often narrowly defined. That's why it made a big splash when, at 81 years of age, Martha Stewart became the latest cover model for the Sports Illustrated swimsuit edition. There's so much wrong with that sentence, I don't even know where to begin.

Pentecost is an invitation to ask the question. Whose voices do we dismiss or ignore, because what they have to say makes us uncomfortable? How do we know the Spirit hasn't entrusted them with a message we need to hear?

I always try to keep in mind, just because I feel strongly about something doesn't mean I'm right. A particular issue isn't resolved just because you and I have already made up our minds about it. It's been said, "God doesn't waste clarity on minds that are already made up." If the Pentecost story tells us anything, it tells us God is in the equalization business.

On the day of Pentecost, there was confusion, because what people experienced defied their expectations. The people who were known as bad communicators were the ones proclaiming God's deeds of power in ways that everyone could understand. Finally, Peter spoke up and said, "Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only 9 o'clock in the morning."

Then, Peter interpreted the Pentecost miracle by going back nearly 500 years to the words of the prophet Joel, in which God declared that the Spirit would be poured out on every kind of flesh. In Joel's prophecy God declares, "I will pour out my Spirit upon all

flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.”

The prophet envisioned the Spirit of God breaking barriers separating people within society. God declared, “Even upon my slaves, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”

In a world in which access to the holy was reserved for certain people, where the roles of men and women were clearly defined, where there were clear boundaries based on ethnicity and religion, this was a remarkable vision. The Holy Spirit would be poured out, without any regard for social distinctions.

And if we don’t cling too tightly to our preconceived notions, it can surprise and delight us. It can be liberating. Even Galileans can proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. Even Tina Turner could delight and inspire the young. Because when the Holy Spirit is poured out, it spills out onto everybody: dark flesh and light flesh, documented flesh and undocumented flesh, young flesh and wrinkled flesh.

God is in the equalization business. The question is are we?