

Well, it is graduation time. High school students and college students all across the country are graduating and entering a new phase in life. It is a special time not only for the graduates, but also for the parents and other family members. I remember my high school graduation well. It wasn't the speech that was given or the friends I saw for the last time that made it so memorable. What made my graduation so memorable was the fact that I had never seen or spoken to the persons seated to my left and right! My graduation class had around 1,000 students, and it just so happened that two people who I had never seen in my life were seated next to me during this special occasion. I thought to myself during the commencement address: "This is really weird. What am I going to do when we throw our caps in the air? I can't hug the person next to me because I've never even met her! I can't high five the guy in front of me because he's a stranger! I guess I'll just throw my cap in the air and hug myself!"

Speaking of graduation season, I read an article in the *Dallas Morning News* last week about a graduating senior named Brett George. Brett repeated a year of school so he has been in school for 14 years. The amazing thing about Brett is that he never missed a day of school in those 14 years – not one day! Brett is from Hallsville, Texas and obviously has two things going for him – good health and commitment. The ironic thing about the George family is that Brett is not the only one with a perfect attendance record. His older sister Candice also never missed a day of school, and his father has 67 sick days saved up at work. His mother has 97 sick days! Brett's father said, "We believe that school is a job. If you have a job to do, you have to do it." Brett said, "It's weird, but when I get sick, it's always over the weekends or vacations. It's not really fair." Fair or not one thing is for sure – this kid shows up and didn't miss much in school.

Sometimes it's not so much how "good" we are, but whether or not we are present. You know I like to fish. Technique is important in fishing. No doubt about it – if you do not know how to fish you are not going to catch fish. But even more than technique there is another important factor in catching fish – being in the right spot at the right time. I love to catch sand bass at Richland Chambers Lake. When the sand bass are schooling there is nothing better. Time seems to stand still. The funny thing about sand bass though is they cut on and off like a water faucet. When they are "on" they are "on"! When they are "off" they are "off"! Three years ago my dad, a friend, and I were fishing for sand bass in April at Richland Chambers. It

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was the best day of fishing we have ever had. At 7:00 a.m. thousands of sand bass surfaced and churned the water like a bunch of piranhas. We caught fish after fish after fish, and every one of them was a nice size. The trick, however, was being there. If we had arrived at the spot an hour later we would not have caught a single fish.

When the day of Pentecost had come, many followers of Jesus were gathered together in one place. Pentecost was the Jewish festival that derived its name from the fifty days that separate it from Passover. The word Pentecost literally means “fiftieth”. Like all Jewish feasts, Pentecost had two significances – agricultural and historical. It had agricultural significance because it marked the beginning of the wheat harvest, and one of its great ceremonies was the offering of two loaves made from the flour of the new wheat. Pentecost had historical significance because it commemorated the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. It was common for devout Jews to spend the whole night before Pentecost studying and praying on the Torah. So it was likely that the night before the Holy Spirit came upon them, the disciples were studying and praying together.

I think that is important for us to recognize and understand that the Holy Spirit came upon a people who studied and prayed together. They were “all together in one place.” There is a great comfort in being all together in one place.

I am a part of a clergy group that meets every two months. The program is called “The Clergy Leadership Initiative” and is facilitated by the Texas Methodist Foundation. The idea behind the program is to connect clergy with one another and provide a relaxed setting to learn from one another and support one another. At first I was a little hesitant about being a part of the program, but now I have come to appreciate the group. We have become friends and have supported one another in the various trials in ministry, of which there are many! It has become a safe place to speak openly and honestly about our lives. The past two times we have met the whole group was not able to be there. We always had one or two missing. This last week, however, all nine of us were together. Gary, our facilitator and leader, looked around the room and said, “Isn’t this nice? Doesn’t it feel good to have everyone here?”

It feels good to be together. I think that is what many of us look forward to on Sunday mornings. We like to see each other and share in our

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relationships. Being together in one place gives us a sense of belonging and reassures us that we are not alone. We support one another. We care for one another. We listen to one another. That is exactly what the disciples and other followers of Jesus were doing during Pentecost and then it happened. The Holy Spirit decided to crash the party.

There was a sound like the rush of a violent wind. It filled the entire house. Suddenly those gathered began to speak in different languages as the Spirit gave them ability. The amazing thing about it all was that everyone understood what was being spoken in their own language. They said to one another, “What does this mean?” There were others who tried to give an explanation for what was happening. They said, “They are filled with new wine.” In other words, they thought they were drunk! Peter heard that explanation and said that they were not drunk for it was only nine o’clock in the morning.

Needless to say, it was quite a scene. I can just imagine hearing the different languages. It’s a good lesson for us to know that when the Holy Spirit came upon the group differences were not eliminated. In fact, differences were celebrated and used to create a spiritual moment. The different languages all came together in harmony. I have said before that I think the melting pot image of the United States is a poor one. I like the image of a tossed salad when thinking about community. A salad has many different ingredients and when they are tossed together it creates a tasty salad. There are juicy tomatoes, crunchy croutons, shredded cheese, fresh lettuce, bacon bits, carrots, etc. They are not as good individually as they are together. A melting pot assumes that everything has to be melted into one entity. That is why it is a poor image of community. We are a salad here at FUMC Mexia. Some of you are croutons, some our cucumbers, some are tomatoes, some are bacon bits – but together we are the church that waits on the Spirit of God. I think it’s okay to celebrate our diversity and to know that we will all not see eye to eye on every issue. That is perfectly acceptable, in fact, it’s preferable. If we all agreed on everything life would be boring. But as a church we know that even though we might be different, we still share a bond in the body of Christ and that we are bound to each other in the blood of Christ.

You just never know what the Holy Spirit is going to do when a bunch of believers get together. We might think we can control and manipulate God’s Holy Spirit, but we have no more control over the Holy Spirit than we

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do a car without a steering wheel. I once attended a worship service where the pastor continued to shout out, “Come, Holy Spirit! Come! Come and fill this place, Holy Spirit! In the name of Jesus, come Holy Spirit!” **[Loud Clap of Thunder]** It was as if he was trying to wake up God and get God’s attention. God probably wanted to say, “If you would shut up for a second I might show up!”

The thing that troubles us low-key Protestants about the Holy Spirit is its unpredictability. We like things in order. We like to know how much is left in the maintenance budget to the penny. We want to know what time the worship service will be over. We want to come in here and look at the bulletin and know what to expect next. We come by it naturally though. The rest of life can be so unpredictable it is kind of refreshing to come to church and have some semblance of order. Maybe that’s why we sit in the same spot Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. Everything else throughout the week has been chaotic, but we know where James Dawley will be seated on Sunday morning! We know that Joe Paschal will be back at the sound board half asleep!

The ironic thing is that with all our tendencies to control worship and situations around us, the Holy Spirit still butts in! The Holy Spirit, even through the mundane, has a way of shaking us up from time to time.

I once talked to a woman about her church. She said it was a “Spirit-filled church.” I asked, “What do you mean, Spirit-filled?” She said, “We are just so full of the Holy Spirit. You can just feel it when you walk in the sanctuary. People are not afraid to express themselves here.” I replied, “That’s great, but did you know that all churches are Spirit-filled? Did you know that the Holy Spirit sometimes moves in a person and you can’t even detect it?” I have been moved on more than one occasion by the Holy Spirit – in worship and in other settings. You know by now that I am about as expressive as that brick over there, but nonetheless, the Spirit still moves even in a boring, predictable Protestant like me! I have been caught off guard by the Holy Spirit a time or two.

I remember we had a hand-washing service here on Maundy Thursday during Holy Week. Betty Thetford and Kathy Paschal were standing by the bowl where we came up to wash our hands to remember Jesus washing his disciples’ feet. I was standing closer to the altar with the communion elements and unexplainably was moved by what I was seeing. I don’t know

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how to explain it, but it was special. I don't know even know what to say about the experience. There is the old saying, "You just had to be there," and I guess that applies to that situation. The Holy Spirit was definitely among us.

William Willimon, a Methodist bishop, told a story about an experience he had at a baptism. He had been called to do a baptism by immersion (dunking!) at a little country church. There was a boy in the church who insisted on being immersed. In the United Methodist Church it is acceptable to be sprinkled with water or immersed. It's not so much the amount of water that matters; it's what God is doing through the moment of baptism.

This bishop met the boy at the steps of the church. The boy's name was Nathan. Nathan wanted to do a practice run of the baptism before the real deal, so the bishop agreed. Nathan said, "Now, you want me to take off my shoes?" The bishop said, "Yeah, that's right. Just remove your shoes. That will be good." Nathan said, "What about socks? Do I need to take off my socks?" "No, you can leave your socks on if you want." Nathan continued, "I want to go all the way under." The bishop replied, "You can go all the way under!"

It was finally time for the service and the place was packed. Before the actual baptism, the bishop asked Nathan, "Is there anything you want to say to the congregation?" Nathan said, "Yeah. You know, I wouldn't be here today if you hadn't put me here. I wouldn't have known that God wanted me to be here if you hadn't told me. When my parents got their divorce, my world ended, and I just thought I didn't have anywhere to go. I couldn't imagine myself without a family. But then you showed me that you were the family. I just hope you feel good about what is happening today because God did this through you. And I want to tell you that I'm taking this seriously and you're going to be proud of me. And for all that ya'll have done, one day you are going to be able to say, 'I had a hand in that. And I helped make him a Christian.' So, thank you."

Nathan then turned to the bishop who had performed countless numbers of baptisms before and he was weeping profusely. The bishop couldn't bring himself together so he said, "Sing a hymn! Sing a hymn!" Nathan said, "You think you can bring yourself together?" The bishop said, "Yes, yes. Sing a hymn! Sing a hymn!"

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On the way home Bishop Willimon thought to himself, “I can’t believe Jesus did that to me. I go out to these places. I’m supposed to be in charge of something. And they make me have to go back and be born again in front of everybody!” The Holy Spirit – what are you going to do?