

Pulpit Appropriate

The Holy Spirit's wild ride on Pentecost is one of the most colorful and exciting accounts in all of scripture. Flames, rushing wind, languages from every corner all in one place—what's not to love? But this isn't exactly our everyday experience of the Spirit, is it? The Spirit can be difficult to see and even more challenging to pin down. It has been a while since those flames danced on those shoulders, and we may think that the Spirit has taken a backseat in recent years. My friend and colleague, Elizabeth Goodrich wonders if we've convinced ourselves that the Spirit "has mellowed with age." She wonders if we might prefer a mellow Spirit, a toned-down Holy Spirit that doesn't rock the boat or us too much.¹

As I prepared to enter the ministry, my mother had strong opinions about my wardrobe. Her catchphrase was "pulpit appropriate." She thought I should wear well-made but understated suits and dresses with sensible heels. I think she was probably a little concerned about what I might show up wearing on any given day. In high school I wore a uniform. In middle school I had a dress code, and I was more than willing to try and emulate the pages of *Seventeen* magazine whenever possible within said dress code. In eighth grade, my favorite outfit was an off-white mohair sweater with popcorn stitches that my mother had worn in college, an off-white corduroy skirt, off-white tights, and red shoes. I thought I looked beautiful, but somehow that sweater disappeared under the cover of darkness only to return at our rehearsal dinner. Beloved but threadbare, the popcorn sweater would not have made her pulpit appropriate list. I don't think she wanted to stifle my creative expression. I do think she worried that the messenger could get in the way of the message.

Sometimes we prefer that the Holy Spirit be pulpit appropriate, wearing sensible shoes and not stirring up too much trouble. Sure, on Pentecost, we let the Spirit loose a little, and we let loose a little, too. We break out our red shirts and shoes. Sometimes we pray or read in another language, and maybe wave some orange, red, or yellow ribbons around. And yet I don't expect to see tongues of actual fire dancing on anyone's shoulders. I do not expect to hear a rushing wind roaring through this sanctuary. Do you? I'm not sure what we'd do if either of these

¹ Elizabeth Goodrich in her paper for the Well, 2011.

things happened here and now. And come tomorrow morning, we will tuck the Pentecost things away and return to life as usual, expecting perhaps to tuck the Spirit safely back into a box, too.

As we have heard over the past few weeks, the Corinthian church is near and dear to Paul's heart. That same church has lost her way, thus, the need for all the letters. There's a sense that the community at Corinth is quite gifted and that they have misunderstood the purpose of their gifts. One gift is not more significant than another. One gift is not to be more prized than another. Each and every gift is given by the one God for one purpose—the common good, the building up of the community of faith, the body. There is no “should” language here. Being a body is not something we need to work on or aspire to be. We *are* a body, the body of Christ, already.

We too have each been given gifts for the larger good, and it is God's Spirit that brings them to life. This Spirit language can make Presbyterians a bit nervous, and rightfully so. The images of wildfires in recent years have reminded us how powerful and uncontrollable wind and fire can be, especially when paired together. And Paul reminds us that this unpredictable and unsettling Spirit is still at work bringing life to every community of faith that bears Christ's name. I hear the Spirit at work when the children lead us in prayer. I see the Spirit at work when an usher helps an older member find her seat. I hear the Spirit at work through when the choir and the entire congregation raise our voices in song. I also sense the Spirit at work in session meetings when we plan and dream for the daily life of this congregation or when the deacons dream about new ways to reach out with God's good news in the community. The Spirit is ever-present, challenging and encouraging us when we face difficult questions as a community, when we face a changing world, and when we sense a need to change ourselves. This is not wind and fire, but it is Spirit work, every day, garden-variety, holy work, which makes complete sense, because God has always been at home in a garden. That's where we first meet God, after all, in the wonderfully vibrant and unpredictable garden, the very place God the Creator shapes us from soil with God's own hands and fills our lungs with God's own breath, God's own Spirit.

During a tour of the sanctuary of a Greek Orthodox cathedral in Pennsylvania a few years ago, the priest reminded everyone gathered what the purpose of the pulpit actually is. Like the angel who meets the women and the disciples at the empty tomb on Easter morning, the one in the pulpit *and* the ones in the pews are called, commissioned to go and tell, to go and live and share the good news of God's triumph over sin and death in raising

Jesus from the dead. That message has never been contained within a pulpit, confined by the walls of a church building, or exclusively owned by one wearing a robe and a mic. The Spirit won't stand for it; nor should we.

I recently came across some photos of several women in their seventies, eighties, and nineties wearing hats and beads and caftans in bright colors and wild prints. Their pictures and stories are featured in a book entitled *Advanced Style: Older and Wiser*, and very little in their wardrobes would be considered pulpit appropriate by any conventional standards. There is not one understated black suit or pair of sensible shoes in sight. In a short documentary about the book, one woman speaks of getting dressed for the theater of life each and every day while pinning on a huge red flower pin. Another insists that great style "improves the environment for everyone."² She embraces who she is and recognizes that her unique and surprising self, her unmatched gift of joy is something to be shared and celebrated in and among the larger world. It's less about what these women are wearing and more about what they carry out and offer to the world. While a tiger-print pantsuit would never have made my mother's list of pulpit appropriate attire, I am convinced that I have witnessed the outlandish and joy-filled Spirit in these women. They do not get in the way of their message of beauty and life and joy. Instead they embody the message. They are both message AND messenger. Truth be told, it's hard to find anything more pulpit appropriate than their determination to share beauty and joy wherever they go with all that they are.

I envy these women a bit. I want to be them when I grow up. They are unapologetically carefree, bold, and joy-filled. And their joy is viral in every good way. Moreover, not once did I hear one of these women say that she made herself over or became something that she wasn't, in order to please anyone or to conform to a certain arbitrary standard of beauty or acceptability. Instead in each one I hear a zeal, an energy for embracing her true self, her true gifts. These women refuse to live by any label or to be boxed in to any set way of being. They embrace who God created them to be; they live out their gifts with unrivaled joy, and in them I hear echoes of Paul in the Message's version of our final verse:

² http://bit.ly/hs_style

Each of us is now a part of [Christ's] resurrection body, refreshed and sustained at one fountain—his Spirit—where we all come to drink. The old labels we once used to identify ourselves—labels like Jew or Greek, slave or free—are no longer useful.

This morning we are ordaining and installing ruling elders and deacons, leaders elected by you to help us discern what God is calling us to do and to be who God is calling us to be. The work is not theirs alone, however. We are all part of Christ's resurrection body—here and now, old and young, wearing coats and ties or jeans and t-shirts or sundresses or gym shorts. The worn-out labels no longer hold; the old, threadbare identities no longer fit. In Jesus Christ, we have been refreshed and renewed for God's work in the world. While our gifts are many and varied, our hope is one. By the grace of God and through the work of the wild and winsome Spirit we have been given a home and a life, a gift and a calling. God's Spirit has never been contained in any one person or community or box or day. The Spirit is too big and too busy for that. Sometimes this Spirit shows up in sensible shoes like work boots, Danskos, cleats, or Crocs. Other times that same Spirit shows up wearing sky high pumps or patent leather flats or fuzzy slippers. On occasion the Spirit wears no shoes at all and dances barefoot up and down the aisles of the church or the courthouse steps or torn up sidewalks downtown.

Look at your shoes. Look at your neighbor's shoes. They are pulpit appropriate. **You** are pulpit appropriate. We are God's children. We are Christ's body. God has entrusted us—**all** of us—with the Good News. We are message **and** messenger. The world is our pulpit. The Spirit has blown in once again to send every one of us out to preach hope and love and justice and grace and courage, to share our gifts for the common good, and to embody the joy of living for the glory of our one extravagant and glorious God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.