

“To Launch or not to Launch”

Acts 2:1-21

On the day of Pentecost, the Christian church experienced a successful launch. It escaped the gravitational pull of a skeptical crowd and achieved an orbit that it continues on today. But we each have a role to play in keeping the church from crashing and burning. Today we read our annual board reports on the ministry we've accomplished in the past year. We elect new board members at our congregational meeting who will help keep our ministries and our church in the orbit of Jesus Christ.

Have you heard of "failure to launch syndrome"? Rockets are not involved in this one. Instead, this problem is quite common among young adults who cannot leave the parental nest. According to a magazine article I was reading, "it is characterized by low levels of motivation, poor work ethic, lack of vision for the future, inability or unwillingness to take responsibility when appropriate and an inability to manage daily household chores." Maybe you saw the movie Failure to Launch, in which Matthew McConaughey played a 35-year-old who had no interest in leaving his parents' comfortable home.

The Christian church also faces its own "failure to launch syndrome."

The church launched at Pentecost. The power of the Holy Spirit was present. Full, complete countdown and launch.

But sometimes, the local expression of the church universal has problems getting off the launch pad. Why is that?

It happens when Christians are not adequately fueled, properly programmed and on the right course.

Only when all three are in place can the church complete its mission. So let's do a countdown:

Three: Christians need to be adequately fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Bible tells us that the apostles blasted off successfully in Jerusalem because "all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit" (v. 4). Without the inspiration of the Spirit, we're never going to get off the ground.

So where can we get this high-octane, highly volatile spiritual fill-up? In worship, for starters. We can pray for the Holy Spirit to help us hear God's Word. We can ask for the Spirit to heal us, touch us and transform us. We can trust the Spirit to make Christ present to us in the bread and cup of Communion. Worship is not a human activity; instead, it is an activity that is both human and divine, with Jesus really present through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes, we need to get out of our comfort zones to experience the power of the Spirit. That may mean singing a hymn or contemporary song when we normally don't sing. It may mean coming to the kneeling rail for prayer on a healing Sunday. It may mean having a spirited congregational leader like Tony Chilia. It may mean asking a relative or friend who doesn't attend worship to come with you and worship with you.

Spiritual fueling begins with worship.

Two: Christians need to be properly programmed to connect with their neighbors. No bugs in the system. On the day of Pentecost, the apostles "began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability" (v. 4).

These backwoods Galileans did not expect the international crowd in Jerusalem to learn Aramaic, the language that each of them had grown up speaking. Instead, they used the diverse languages given to them by the Spirit to speak to the people around them "about God's deeds of power" (v. 11).

We can program ourselves to make connections, learning new languages and new communication tools to reach our neighbors. Richard Lindsay, the co-editor of PopTheology.com, says that we need to make use of creative multimedia, "actual popular culture that people interact with every day, as well as music and art generated by congregation members or local artists."

Since covid hit us in 2020, we've been live streaming our Sunday services. On a typical Sunday we have 175 sites worshipping with us. We welcome everyone of you as we try to help you see why Jesus is important and relevant in your eyes.

Peter's first century message was about why Jesus was important and had relevance in their eyes.

Peter himself symbolizes and embodies a kind of language-gift the dancing flames of the Holy Spirit had imparted -- the power to turn the fearful and tongue-tied into vital witnesses for Christ's gospel. Peter, the most cowardly on the night of Jesus' arrest, now becomes the most communicative on the day of the Spirit's descent. Peter denies the charges of drunkenness and states the true meaning behind the multilingual, multicultural display the Pentecost event has produced.

Peter cites the profoundly inclusive prophecy of the ninth-century B.C. Prophet Joel to describe the true nature of the new age that has now dawned with the Holy Spirit's arrival.

The Joel text goes beyond the boundaries of nationality and geography to declare that there no longer will be any spiritual distinctions between men and women, old and young, servants and free or a special, spiritually gifted priesthood and the common laity. According to Joel's prophecy, which Peter invokes as evidence of the new age that has now begun, all are eligible to "prophecy" -- to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The gift at Pentecost is the stunning message of true equality and reciprocity among all people in the Spirit.

Three – Christians need to be adequately fueled by the power of the Spirit.

Two – Christians need to connect with their friends and neighbors as equals.

And One – Inspired by the Spirit and making connections with others, we can embark on a mission of sharing good news with people around us.

Peter stood up and promised that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (vs.21). He gave his hearers a message of inclusion and hope.

Today we must share that same message of inclusion and hope while being careful not to be judgmental. I want to share four things we should never say that I hear far too often from so called “Christians”. Members of Divinity would never say any of these 4 things.

1. “Are you saved?” That question will almost always put people on the defensive and make them feel like they’re being judged. That question usually closes rather than opens a conversation.

2. “You’re going to hell” if you have an abortion, or if you commit suicide, or if you’re gay, or you fill in the blank. Making a personal judgment on someone else’s status with God will never connect you with another person in a positive way.

3. “Your church does not follow the Bible” or using any other negative connotation about another person’s church will instantly shut down the conversation. Sharing our faith does not require criticizing someone else’s.

4. “How can you believe that” we evolved from apes or that there were dinosaurs on Noah’s Ark, or that Sarah had a baby in her 90’s or fill in the blank. The nature of faith means that people can have different views and interpret scripture differently. The more we’re willing to talk about the gray areas of faith, the more we will be prepared to talk about differing views with the folks we connect with.

Many of us are reluctant to reach out to our neighbors and friends fearing their judgment or rejection. But the truth is that many people today are feeling isolated and alone, and will welcome a visit that is honest and respectful. When visiting a neighbor or friend, there are two simple questions that can get a conversation going: "What do you like about living here? What would make it better?"

Such questions are not spiritual, in and of themselves. But they open the door to religious conversations. When people tell you what they like about living in the community, you can get a sense of what matters to them, and where their values and interests lie. When they tell you about what would make the community better, you are given an opportunity to talk about what your church can do for them.

You can explain how you are involved, and why your faith inspires you to take action. Plus, you can get ideas for new ways to meet the needs of your community.

If they have teenagers at home, tell them about our youth servant trips. If they are senior citizens, encourage them to participate in our next event for retirees like Voyagers.

If they have small children, invite them to Sunday school or Vacation Bible School.

Before you say good-bye, let them know how much joy and inspiration you get from worship, and tell them that you would love to welcome them and sit with them in an upcoming service.

From two simple questions, you can begin to build a relationship based on authentic concern.

The Pentecost countdown includes the fuel of the Holy Spirit, a program to connect with friends and neighbors, and a mission to bring good news to the world. As children, when men were landing on the moon, we were into launching those small, model rockets in the back yard. We would light the fuse and quickly run backwards while shouting “three, two, one...blast-off!” These three qualities were in place when the church first launched, and they will keep us flying on the right course today.

May the peace of God . . .

#400 – God of Tempest, God of Whirlwind