

Windblown: Acts 2:1-11

by [Jim Callahan](#) in the [May 24, 2000](#) issue

It was a great day for multiculturalism. It was the Tower of Babel turned upside-down, and what fell out was a glorious manifestation of the grace of God. It was also a tough day for future lay readers: all those forbidding names—Parthians, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Cappadocians, Phrygians, Pamphylians—that whole crowd. In Luke's geography they represented "every nation under heaven." Devout Jews of the Diaspora were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the 50th day after the consecration of the harvest and the Passover. Although bound by a common religious past, their languages and dialects were as diverse as those heard at Ellis Island in the early 1900s.

The surviving disciples of Jesus were there too. How they got to the head table Dr. Luke does not tell us, but there they were. Then something utterly wondrous happened. God happened. The symbols tell the story: wind and fire and Spirit! Suddenly the whole place was smoking, and the disciples began to look like so many oversized trick birthday candles, crowned with tongues of fire that even the mighty wind could not blow out. We are not told what they said in their Galilean, ex-fishermen, ex-tax collector brogues. We are told, however, of the greatest of all miracles: everyone in the house understood each other.

Some call Pentecost the "birthday of the church." I disagree. I sense that the church was born on Good Friday when Jesus, "just hanging around," as Robert Capon stunningly puts it, asked the Father to forgive us, and a few bewildered, broken-hearted women and men wandered off wondering how they were going to live with that. Pentecost was the day they got their answer: with great joy, and with wind and fire and Spirit, making them look like a bunch of happy drunks in the midst of a numbingly sober and sour world. At last they knew that they were God's—every last one of them—and that God was Love, not just in poetic theory but in palpable fact. They learned that in belonging to God they belonged also to each other. The joy derived from their trusting contained power, power not only to gladden but also to heal and redeem.

In today's world, especially in our anxious Western culture, we seem hell-bent on happiness and on any shortcut that can get us there. Generally we seek a happiness that is a far cry from what went on that day of Pentecost. The 16th chapter of John's Gospel clarifies the difference. In Jesus's long, beautiful farewell to his disciples, he tells them that he must go away and leave them and that they will be sorrowful. Then he adds: "but your sorrow will turn into joy."

It has taken me a lifetime of what Dorothy Day called "the long loneliness" to discern the power and the simplicity of that most comforting of words. They turn out to be a power definition: Joy is something that sorrow *turns into*. No sorrow, no joy! That is precisely the joy that turned the world upside-down on the day of Pentecost. The definition adds a new dimension to the familiar lines, "Joyful, joyful, we adore thee," as it implies a people willingly and compassionately entering into the suffering and sorrow of an unjust and unmerciful world.

There has been one event in my life in which I came close to apprehending the wonder of Pentecost. It occurred during the solemnest of priestly obligations. For over a year I had been the custodian of the ashes of a child in my parish who had died of AIDS. The father was a Frenchman who wished to have his son's ashes interred in his family cemetery in eastern France, near Dijon. I agreed to bring the ashes there and to hold the service with his family and friends. The cemetery dated back some 600 years. The family was predominantly Roman Catholic, and few of them spoke English. Leaden gray clouds hovered over the ancient burial ground. A light mist of rain made us bring out umbrellas. A great slab of stone was rolled back to allow me to enter the underground vault.

I stammered my way through the liturgy, and the gathered friends and family were more than courteous and gracious, though the only French I felt confident about was *jus d'orange* and *merci*, neither of which I could manage to work into the service. The grandmother of the child stunned me when she thanked me for "the mess" I had made. Her daughters-in-law quickly explained that this was the French for "mass."

It was a time of great healing for the parents and their devoted family and friends. Afterward, we went to a 400-year-old inn and had lunch, which turned into a French wake, with joy and camaraderie and love flowing as freely as the wine. I didn't understand a word they were saying, but I understood what was being said.

The name of what was going on is the name of what was going on the day of Pentecost. It is always a miracle of sorts, whether recognized or not. It always comes from God, whether we know it or not, and bears God's most beautiful of names: love. Unleashed from an empty tomb, God's outlandish love found its way into empty hearts, and the world has never been the same since.