

Sermon

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St. John the Evangelist

May 20th, 2018

Pentecost (B): Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:25-35, 37; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

In the late 19th century, London was the biggest city in the world. From 1800 to 1900 its population went from 1 million to almost 7 million people. Most of these 7 million people got around the city via some form of horse drawn transportation. It is estimated that there were about 50,000 horses transporting people around London each day. And that doesn't account for the horses transporting goods and making deliveries across the city. Now having that many horses created some major problems. A single horse can produce between 15 and 35 pounds of manure a day and with that much manure and that many horses, sanitation workers didn't stand a chance. And thus London came to face what history would call, The Great Horse Manure Crisis of 1894.¹² One commentator at the time famously said that, by his estimation, in fifty years London would be buried under 9 feet of manure. As gross as this was, the most dangerous aspect of it was that manure attracts flies, and flies spread disease. This was a major health crisis. And London wasn't the only major city with this problem. Around the same time, New York had a population of 100,000 horses producing upwards of 2.5 million pounds of manure every day. This was a global crisis. So in 1898 they called the world's first "international urban planning conference" in New York in order to address the manure crisis. Unfortunately delegates weren't able to agree upon a solution to the problem, mostly because none of the urban planners could imagine a city that wasn't dependent on horses for transportation. The conference was meant to last ten days, but, exasperated, they called it quits after just three. The major cities of the world were doomed to death by manure.

But little did those urban planners know that the solution to their problem was being developed by a young man from Michigan right about that same time. For around the turn of the century, a young Henry Ford was developing and manufacturing the first affordable motor car—the Model T. Now, Ford did not invent the Model T to solve the horse manure crisis of the great cities of the world, but that's what happened. By 1912, less than 15 years after the urban planning conference ended in hopelessness, cars outnumbered horses in New York and London effectively ending The Great Horse Manure Crisis.

{I tell you this story for two reasons. The first is to remind those of you suffering from an acute bout of Anglo-philia after all the royal wedding hoopla yesterday that were it not for a little American ingenuity the streets outside Buckingham palace would be covered by a mountain manure. That was some church service though, I hope you got a chance to see it, especially the homily.}

The second reason is because today in the Church year we celebrate Pentecost a day on which the whole course of human history was changed by the arrival of the Holy Spirit. And the work of the Holy Spirit is invariably, to do something *new*. On Pentecost, a *new* thing is happening, a thing that changes the world, even more than the Model T.

Pentecost comes just ten days after Jesus ascends into heaven once and for all. The disciples are huddled together, unsure about what to do. For while Jesus had promised to send the Holy Spirit, it wasn't there yet and they had no idea when or how it was going to show up. And then suddenly, with a rush of wind they are filled to overflowing with the Spirit and they begin speaking in new, foreign, previously unknown languages in the middle of the city. Peter begins preaching to the crowd and he quotes a prophecy from the prophet Joel that says through the Spirit it will not just be established prophets and priests who will speak of God's glory, it will be

¹ <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/Great-Horse-Manure-Crisis-of-1894/>

² <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/11/16/hosed>

your sons and daughters, even slaves; men *and* women. All people are coming to know God through the Spirit. Young men who have not lived long enough to see the world will be given new visions for what that world could be. And old men who have lived so long that their visions for what the world could be have calcified, will dream new dreams. A new thing is happening on Pentecost, something hoped for, but unforeseen. Impossible things are happening. The Holy Spirit, by its very nature, brings forth new life.

One of the great tragedies of our human condition is how accustomed we get to the *status quo*; how difficult it becomes to see anything but what's in front of us. Our daily lives furrow such well-worn ruts that pretty soon, all we can see are the steep embankments rising on either side of us, tricking us into believing that the path we are on is the only path there is. Like those urban planners unable to imagine a city without horses and the manure they deposit, we lose our vision, we lose our capacity to dream dreams about what could be.

I have noticed in recent years the increasingly common usage of the phrase, "It is what it is." I understand that it can be a helpful way of letting go of things that are outside of our control. But I worry that as it is used more and more it will start being used in a way that makes us feel okay about the continuation of unacceptable circumstances; that it will function like blinders restricting us from imagining something more than what we can see. 18,000 homeless people in Massachusetts? "It is what it is." Endless war in Palestine? "Well, it's been that way forever...It is what it is." Another school shooting? "Well, nothing ever changes so, I guess it is what it is."

I'd much prefer if people looked at the world and instead of "it is what it is," said, "it is not yet what it could be." That's a Spirit filled statement; a worldview that says "it does not have to be this way." We need that vision, that power to see and make impossible things possible no matter who we are or what we do. Our lives can get really locked in. We can drive some really deep, comfortable ruts as we go about things. But what the Holy Spirit wants to do for us is burst in and shake us free and show us there is so much more possible for you, for this world. It does not have to be this way. Paul, in his letter to the Romans this morning uses the metaphor of childbirth to talk about the new thing the Spirit longs to bring forth in us. He puts his finger on that spiritual longing that manifests as an ambiguous discomfort—hard to pinpoint, but it gets you feeling "off." It's a yearning, a hope for a future that is new, different but it's unclear exactly what it will be. It's the sense that the present is not quite right. That's the Spirit, Paul says, trying to break forth from us and show us what new thing is possible in our lives if we would just be courageous enough to let it out.

The Holy Spirit wants to do a new thing in you. {That's one of the reasons Pentecost is such a good day for baptisms, for what is a baptism but the celebration of a new thing, the beginning of a new life in Christ, a chance for us to wonder, what new thing the Spirit will do in these lives.} "I still have many things to say to you," Jesus tells his disciples in today's Gospel, "but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit comes, [it] will guide you into all the truth." Meaning the good news Jesus came proclaiming is not finished. There is more truth for us to discover; new and yet more glorious things waiting to be revealed in us. Let the Holy Spirit guide you out of the ruts and into a new landscape. Let it release you from thinking "well, this is just the way the world works...this is just how life is." Let the Spirit of the Living God fall fresh on you and show you what is possible. See visions. Dream dreams. Be bold. Be made new. Change the world, for God's sake. By the grace and power of the Holy Spirit you can do it. And I'll tell you this much, hard as it is to do a new thing, it sure beats drowning in a bunch of manure.