

June 9, 2019 – Pentecost Sunday, Reception of New Members
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Acts 2:1-21; John 14:8-17

Marketing for Members

Nice job Nice job singing the Holy Spirit during the Acts reading today! The intent of that was creative chaos, something surprising and improvisatory and maybe even moving, something like what those in the Acts reading might have felt. We weren't sure how it would go, we just had to experience it all together on the spot, being surrounded by the Holy Spirit, voiced in different ways by different people but universally comprehensible. That seemed fitting for Pentecost.

I think it was fitting, too, that we sang the Holy Spirit at different speeds, because I think the Holy Spirit works at different speeds. Sometimes the Holy Spirit works quickly, so very quickly: all of a sudden people are moved to do something different, be somewhere different, act somehow differently. Other times the Spirit takes a much slower course, moving people bit by bit with gentle nudges, over time.

I was thinking about these different speeds at which the Spirit moves after a recent church meeting. I'd been telling those gathered how we were going to have some new members joining, though I wasn't yet sure who would all be in the group. Some people are ready to become members right away, they come to church and then ask me when the next new member Sunday is, before I even mention it as something to think about. Others take a little more time, it's more of a "dipping one's toes in" sort of dynamic, I'll bring it up, later check in, see where they are. I was talking about this at the meeting and then one of the people there, a person who has been here for quite some time and whom I know to be involved in various aspects of church life—you can find their name on the plaque in the back of church, the plaque that lists the recipients of this church's annual exemplary volunteer award—well at that meeting, when I noted how it sometimes takes people a little more time to decide if they want to become a member, this very committed person said, "It took me twenty years."

It can take some time, considering becoming a member, inviting people to become members. One may ask why even have them? Nowadays some churches are doing away with membership altogether. Some of this has to do with changes in society, changing attitudes. People have many things going on in their lives, are moving in many different directions, don't want to be pinned down, or labeled. So some churches have moved away from the practice of membership, or the word, pointing out that "member" can have unfortunate connotations, can suggest exclusivity: country clubs have members. I don't think we're at risk of being mistaken for a country club. But I do like to repeat a line that I've swiped from an exclusive credit card, that line being, "Membership has its privileges." It does. You need to borrow forty forks? We've got them for you. They're yours, everything here is, it all belongs to members, all members, whether they joined twenty years ago or just today, all of this is all yours: the forks, the folding chairs, the font, what we receive at it: the freedom, the grace, that is given to us, here. It's all yours. Becoming a member means taking hold of that wonderful privilege, that most exclusive, most inclusive category, being children of God, co-heirs with Christ. Agreeing to become a member means accepting and owning the wonderful inheritance that God bestows upon us.

Though in regard to ownership, I would quote another advertising line, which also

happens to be about something high end, in this case a very, very expensive watch. I think an advertising tagline for this watch also relates to the church and how it is ours: this line being: “You never actually own a [name of very expensive watch]. You merely look after it for the next generation.” That could also be said of the church, the building, the faith. Members don’t actually own it, we merely look after it for the next generation. That’s a good reminder of what we are about, as a church, looking after it for the next generation, looking after the place to gather, and pray, and praise, looking after the values, and ideals, and identity; looking after the community, and the connections, the continual redevelopment and reengagement, looking for that next generation. That’s what we do, as a church, but that can also sound daunting, not so “merely” a thing to do. And so when I invite people to become members I don’t tell them, “the future of the church depends on you.” Because it doesn’t. It never has. From the birthday of the church that day of Pentecost and still today it depends on the Holy Spirit.

The future of the church does not depend on us, but we do have a part in it, or rather, we can be a part in it, we are invited to, we are offered the privilege. Will we listen for the Holy Spirit? Will we let the Spirit speak to and through different people, and to and through us? Will our voices also sing the Holy Spirit? Will we let it move us? Sometimes it will move us to do something different, all at once. The weight we’d been carrying around will be suddenly lifted. Sometimes it will take years of nudging, bit by bit, until one day we realize we are in a different place, we are a different person. The Spirit moves at different speeds, at different times. The Spirit moves at different speeds, in different people. Being open to this and being together as a worshipping community is what it means to be members. We use that word, because it’s the word the Bible gives for the church and the people in it, for how we relate to one another and to our head. Freed and led by the Spirit, we are members of the body of Christ.