

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Text: Acts 2:1-21
(Pentecost)
LHUMC 6/8/14

- I. Introduction
 - A. “So...anyone out there under the influence this morning? If you had a go at the Spiritualizer”, where would the needle point for you? (Spirit-filled? “There’s hope”? or “nothing there”).
 1. It’s kind of unfortunate that in our time and culture that phrase has such negative connotations (although rightly so)
 2. When we hear the phrase “under the influence” we fill in the next blank and picture roadside check points and mug shots and worse.
 - B. But what we have here this morning is a story of people “under the influence”—not of “spirits” but of the “Spirit” (not small “s”/plural but capital “S” singular)
 1. And it is kind of interesting that the onlookers to this story had a hard time distinguishing the difference.
 - a) “They’re drunk on cheap wine” they scoff.
 - b) And Peter comes right back at them—No it’s too early in the day for the kind of “under the influence” you think this is—this is something else.
 - C. And we can’t really blame the crowd.
 1. Put yourself in their place—you are there in Jerusalem for this yearly festival, and all of a sudden over there is a group of people making a spectacle of themselves—shouting in gibberish, heads spinning.
 2. You too might wonder what was in the cooler that they brought with them on their trip to Jerusalem.
- II. Given all the spectacle, in all honesty, I’ve struggled some with this story over the years.
 - A. I would put this story in the category of some other Biblical stories, like Moses and the Burning Bush or Daniel in the lion’s den, for example.

1. In the first one, my question has always been “what if I’ve never seen a burning bush?” “Does that mean I’ve really been called by God?”
 2. In the second one, the question has been “What if I’ve never found myself surrounded by that much danger?” “Would God really protect me like that if I was?”
 3. In today’s story, the question is, “What if I’ve never experienced the Spirit like wind and fire?” “What if I’ve never been able to suddenly speak in languages that other people can understand?” Does that mean that I’m really under the influence of the Holy Spirit?
 4. And if we had kept going with today’s story, and found out that at the end of Peter’s sermon that we get just the opening of today, 3,000 people came to Christ and joined the movement, the questions continue—“If as a preacher, that’s never been the response to one of my messages, does that mean that I’m really under the influence of the Spirit?”
 5. I call these stories “high bar” stories—stories where the Bible sets the bar so high in terms of God’s call and claim on our lives, it’s easy to get discouraged if we haven’t personally experienced stories like them
- B. But what I am starting to understand this week as I’ve looked at this story from a broader Biblical perspective is that perhaps the story of the first Pentecost simply is setting the bar for us not higher, but maybe in a different direction that what we are used to or even comfortable with. That if no one has ever accused us of being under the influence of spirits when we are actually under the influence of the Spirit, that that doesn’t mean that the needle can’t go high for us.
- C. How have I come to this realization?
1. Partly by looking back at some people I have known.
 - a) I always think back to my first real pastoral experience—attending License to Preach school in southern Ohio.
 - b) I remember being surrounded by people who either told stories like we heard today of times they had experienced the Holy Spirit or even were sort of living out Pentecost experiences like that right there in front of me.

- c) And it was kind of shock for me. Coming from a button-down, mainline, intellectual, church background, I'd never witnessed anyone speaking in tongues like I did that week.
- d) So I'm there amidst these people who are so obviously under the influence—and I was pretty sure it was the Holy Spirit—I don't think they had brought coolers with the other spirits with them.
- e) And I'm thinking—"Am I missing something? Am I going into the right line of work?"
- f) What it took for me eventually was to look back and around at people I had known—those who were and are what I have come to call "quiet saints".
- g) And I have had the privilege to see and serve with folks like that in every church we've been in.
- h) Those who show what it looks like to be under the influence in less-flashy, more behind-the-scenes kinds of ways.
- i) People who are all about not just serving but things like prayer and discernment.
- j) People who appreciate the opportunity to work alongside other people, even if the other people get the credit.
- k) People who I know I can count on, whether it is in a time in my life when I need them, or a time in the church's life when the church needs them.
- l) Kind of like our third character in the skit—people who don't necessarily say much, but in their actions show me exactly what it looks like to be under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and that it can be different than what those folks at the first Pentecost were like.
- m) Not that it's wrong to be that kind of Spirit-filled—to have charisma, to be ecstatic and excited-- there's nothing wrong with those signs of being under the influence, as long as it's about God and not us. That's where the first character in the skit got it wrong.
- n) Barbara Brown Taylor sums up her experience of people under the influence of the Holy Spirit, and she kind of talks about both types—those who are charismatic and enthusiastic about it and those who are more reserved. She talks about how the

second kind can become the first, through the power of the Spirit: “Under the power (and influence) of the Holy Spirit, shy people have been known to step up onto platforms and say audacious things (that would be me). Cautious people have become daredevils, frugal people have become philanthropists and people who used to be sour as dill pickles have become rich with friends.” (*Pulpit Resource*, April-June, 2003, p. 48).

- o) I would agree with her to a point—that the Holy Spirit can lead us to do and be in ways we never would have imagined.
 - p) But in my experience, sometimes shy people stay shy, and still are under the influence of the Holy Spirit.
 - q) I actually read one commentator this week who called the Holy Spirit the “shy member” of the Trinity. Which would suggest it doesn’t always come in the wind and fire.
 - r) And that you don’t always have to be windy or fiery to show that you are under its influence.
 - s) Perhaps the best way to tell if you are really under the influence of the Holy Spirit is if what you do is more and more about God and less and less about you.
2. The other thing that has been really helpful to me in figuring this “under the influence” stuff out is to look at what Paul has to say about spiritual gifts, particularly in places like 1 Corinthians, where he lists all the gifts of the spirit.
- a) Point being, if living out the gifts that the Spirit has given us is the ultimate sign that we are under the influence, then perhaps looking at those lists might be helpful.
 - b) So when you do that, you see things on his list that you find in the Pentecost story—there is speaking in tongues and exhortation, for example. All of that was certainly going on that day.
 - c) But there are other things on that list that if we have them and live them out, might present to the world a different picture of what it looks like to be under the influence of the Spirit.
 - 1) Things like “teaching”, or “prayer”, or “discernment” or “mercy” or even “administration”.
 - 2) If you have the gift of “administration” (and you know who you are!) If you are good with the details and a good

organizer and good behind the scenes once you've done the organizing, and you are living those things out, do you think of yourself as "filled with the Spirit?"

- 3) Paul is giving you permission to do so by including those kind of gifts on the list.
- 4) If you are comfortable praying for people or situations, and it comes naturally to you to do so, I would say that you are not only using the spiritual gift of prayer, but you are Spirit-filled—even if no one sees you in those times of prayer.
- d) And the other thing that Paul says more than once that is key to all of this is that no one gift is more important than any of the others on the list. He was clear that all are equal barometer of what it looks like to be filled with the Spirit.
- e) And he says that because he was worried that those in the early church were assuming (wrongly) that the more "flashy" gifts were more important and more indicative of whether someone was under the influence of the Spirit.

III. Conclusion

- A. The other thing that is clear to me as I read the Pentecost story is that the only chance to survive and grow into the future is if we as a community of faith are influenced by the Holy Spirit. And just like us as individuals, there are countless ways for the church to show what it's like to be under the influence.
 1. As the Book of Acts unfolds from this point on, it is clear that the only hope for that church was to be under the influence of the Holy Spirit (did you know that the Holy Spirit shows up 41 times in the book?)
 2. And in our time, when the church is under just as much of a threat as it was back then, not so much from persecution as from cultural indifference, nothing has changed.
 3. If we aren't under the influence of the Spirit around here, there is no hope.
- B. Willimon: "For the church to be the church, we must be part of that breathless race to keep up with the Holy Spirit. That's who we are. This is how we began and it's the only way we can continue as a church—to race to keep up with promptings of the Spirit. What might our church be if we constantly kept ourselves more open and

receptive to the sometimes wild promptings of the Holy Spirit?
Where might we be led and how much adventure might be restored
to our practice of the Christian faith? It's enough to make you drunk
with the possibilities. (*Pulpit Resource*, April-June 2013, p. 31)

1. Are you drunk with the possibilities? As you live out those VCI prescriptions and beyond will you do it as those who are under the influence of the Spirit?
2. God will be watching you. I will be watching you from afar to see where the needle is for you as a community of faith.
3. But the good news of Pentecost is that as the Spirit came to them, it still comes to us. It is a gift given to us for the taking and for the using.
4. Thanks be to God for the gift of the Holy Spirit and that we live each and every day under its influence.