

Prayer and Pentecost
Acts 1:14, 2:1-21
Romans 8:22-27

Pentecost, 2021
Port Williams United Baptist Church
Dr. Don Flowers, Jr

It isn't a secret to anyone who knows me. I am a NASCAR fan. Forever. I was a NASCAR fan before it was cool, and have stayed even now that it's not so cool! I have endured the slings and arrows and caustic comments from friends. It doesn't matter. It is in my blood!

My father used to go to races with his brothers and took me to my first race when I was about 8. We went to the World 600, to the infield. The longest race in the world and I remember falling asleep. Later we went to Darlington and I was hooked.

Prior to moving to Port Williams I went to the race in Darlington for about 10 years with my dear friend Richard Nunan. A so unusual pair—the Baptist minister and the chair of the Religion and Philosophy Department at the College of Charleston. The first year we went to the race Richard wore a shirt that said, *"This is what a feminist looks like."* I thought we'd be killed!

I know all the rebukes! It is just a lot of people driving fast and making left hand turns and waiting for the wrecks! Well, today they are racing at a road course and so they will have to make right hand turns too! But it is the power and the noise! Standing in the 4th turn as the cars finish their first lap. You can feel the sound in your bones!

And yes, there is something about watching the wrecks! We might as well be honest, right? The crash bam boom! That is pure excitement!

That is what today is all about! Today is NASCAR day at church! It is Pentecost Sunday, the day in which the Spirit was poured out on the church with incredible amazing loud results!

We heard the story. They were all together in one place—in these days that would be miraculous in and of itself, wouldn't it? They were all together and suddenly there came a sound, a loud noise from heaven. It sounded like a tornado, and it filled the whole house! It was so loud they felt it! It rattled the plates, it rattled their bones, it rattled their souls.

And then, then there was the fire—appearing as if out of no where, touching each of them, dancing around. Doesn't this sound like a Talladega wreck?

Next thing you know this whatever it is has spilt out into the streets of Jerusalem which were crowded due to the feast going on. There were people from all over speaking all kinds of languages. But the amazing thing is that each of them heard what was being said in their own language!

The next thing you know Peter, that fisherman from Galilee, took to the stage and began preaching. He pulled out passages from the prophet Joel.

*'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'*¹

That is good stuff!

Portents in the sky and signs on the earth!

Blood, fire, smoke! The sun turning to darkness and the moon to blood! Who wouldn't pay to see that? Who wouldn't drive a long way, camp out for several nights just to be able to tell their neighbors, "*You'll never guess what I saw this weekend!*" Crash Bam Boom!

That is why the church gets so excited about Pentecost! This is just really good stuff!

Several years ago a friend invited me to go with him to a race at Bristol. Now for those who don't know anything about NASCAR, at that time it was like being asked to go to the 7th game of the Stanley Cup. You couldn't get a ticket to that race! At night in the mountains of Tennessee, a half mile track with turns banked at 38°.

Only, only, what I didn't know was that we didn't have seats. All we had were pit passes!

Translation—we were going to have to stand up behind the Leafs during Game 7!!!! Does it get any better??? (The answer is no!)

So we got to go down before the race. We saw the drivers, the broadcasters. (Yes I was nearly delirious with excitement!)

We were able to walk out on the track! We were able to watch as the crews got the cars ready.

¹ Acts 2:17-21. NRSV

Notice anything interesting about this picture that I took about 2 hours before the race started? This man is standing where the engine is supposed to be! And this man is slowly and patiently glueing lug nuts on to tires to save a few seconds during tire changes.

On any given Sunday afternoon fans watch the drivers as they go round and round the track. We wait for the passes, the late charges, the wrecks. That is why we watch. No one gets excited about glueing lug nuts? But the fact is races are won or lost in these moments, the scenes few people ever see, or get excited about.

I want to suggest that the same thing is true for Pentecost. It is a big deal! It may be one of my favorite Sundays of the church year, because like everyone else I love a great birthday party!

But to understand why it happens....

To understand Pentecost we have to go back a chapter, go back a week. Last week we heard the story of Jesus ascension. When Jesus had left them Luke tells us that the disciples returned to Jerusalem and "*were constantly devoting themselves to prayer.*"²

It sounds like glueing lug nuts!

Jesus had told them that they were to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth, and here they are...praying? Shouldn't they be doing something a bit more useful? Something a bit more exciting?

I was in a meeting in another church where we had a long agenda. This meeting was going to take forever! As we began however, the chair asked if there was anything we needed to be praying about.

Confession: I was the pastor, the religious leader, right? But everything inside me wanted to scream out, "We don't have time to pray! We have things to do!"

Do you ever feel that way?

That is how we feel so much of the time don't we? There is so much that needs to be done! There are so many people hurting—the warfare in Palestine, the Covid pandemic around the world, especially in India; there is so much of creation that is groaning—climate change that is melting icecaps, changing the flow of the Gulf Stream, bringing flooding storms to Texas, wildfires here in Nova Scotia. And that doesn't take into consideration all the violence, discrimination, the 'isms' that infect our world.

There is so much that needs to be done! We don't have time to...to pray!

And yet, do we have time not to pray?

Isaiah said that those who wait for the Lord. The word is not a passive resting, though that too can be good. But the word used is the same as twisting rope to make it stronger, to prepare it for the task ahead.

In our world of instant everything, waiting is one of the hardest things imaginable. "You mean I have to wait for the mail!" "You want me to fax you something?" "What do you

² Acts 1:14. NRSV

mean I can't watch that show now?" To wait means that we aren't in control, that we can't make things happen on our schedule.

There are times when the most important thing we can do, is wait.

And pray.

Will Willimon reminds us, "*Even to know all **about** Jesus, even to have received instructions from Jesus himself for forty days is not enough to accomplish the church's mission. The challenge is not the intellectual one of **knowing** enough to tell about Jesus but rather the challenge is to have the authorization and empowerment which enable succeeding witnesses to be doing the work of Jesus.*"³

Knowing isn't enough. We need the empowering of God to do the work we need to do.

This past week we received the word that our pause, our lockdown, is going to be extended until the middle of June. I confess that when I heard that news, even though it wasn't a shock, I felt my heart fall.

There are so many things that we want to do! We're supposed to be heading to our cottages, taking those final exams, preparing for graduation parties! We are postponing our next Wednesday Night Conversation because we really need to be together in one place to make this one happen. So I was bummed!

Then I read this scripture again, and wondered...

What if we spent the next few weeks in serious prayer about where God is leading us, as individuals, as a congregation? Not just the "God bless..." kind of prayers, but the kind that sits and waits and listens.

Do we know how to pray that kind of prayer? Do we even know how to pray?

I recently heard a podcast with Father James Martin⁴ which caused me to get his new book, *Learning to Pray*. I was so taken by it that for the next few weeks I am going to use it to guide our sermons. It is a way of helping us learn to pray, in ways that maybe might expand our ideas, our understanding, our expectations.

It isn't the crash, bam, boom of fire dancing on our heads, of violent winds blowing through our homes. But it might just be the power that will transform us and turn our world upside down.

I hope you will join me in praying.

³ William Willimon. *Acts*. (John Knox Press:Atlanta, GA, 1988) 21.

⁴ <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/father-james-martin-what-good-is-prayer/>