

“Under the Influence,” Acts 2:1-21
Tom Johnson, May 23, 2010

People under the influence can do extraordinary things. A controlled substance can make people behave in ways that are out of step with typical human behavior. People who are otherwise peaceful can become violent. A person who is, under normal circumstances, shy and reserved can do things they will later regret.

It’s why the Scripture says “Do not get drunk” (Eph 5:18) and why government programs encourage young people to “Just say ‘no.’” The consequences of being under the influence of a controlled substance can be fatal.

Just this week in the Chicago Tribune, there was a young child killed because the mother’s boyfriend was drunk behind the wheel. And a teenage girl ran over her classmate while she was driving high on drugs. People under the influence can do extraordinary things.

The people gathered in the temple at Jerusalem to worship saw some unusual behavior. And the source of the strange behavior was a group of Galileans—from the northern hills of Israel. For many, Galileans were known as uneducated hillbillies.

And here they are disrupting the worship of everyone else. For starters, there is this odd and loud noise like a violent wind. And just as people are trying to make sense of what this noise can be, a group of Galileans begin to all speak at once.

And they are not speaking in unison—they are not even speaking the same language. These Galileans are speaking in at least 16 different languages and dialects. And each language is heard and understood by those worshiping in the temple from their respective countries.

Even though the languages are different, the message is the same—they are talking about the “mighty works of God”—how God did great things through Jesus Christ—how Jesus healed diseases and raised the dead—

—how Jesus revealed the true nature of the Kingdom—not a kingdom of the sword and power but a kingdom of peace, love, and forgiveness—how this Jesus from Galilee spoke with great authority to the religious leaders and Roman powers—

—how the Romans, Jews, and all the world publicly executed him on a wooden cross—but how he rose again from the dead—how he overcame death and the grave—and how he promises this victory over death and eternal life to the world.

For some people who saw and heard this uproar in the temple, they were just trying to make sense of it. For others, the only explanation was drunken behavior. They said, “They are filled with new wine.”

And Peter's answer to their charge that these Christians were high on a controlled substance is twofold. For starters, it's simply too early in the morning to be drinking alcohol—it's on the third hour after sunrise—9am.

The truth is that they are under the influence of a mind-altering and life-altering substance—they are under the influence of almighty God—they are filled with the Holy Spirit. And the filling of the holy Spirit can happen anytime during the day. It is always appropriate to be under the influence of the Holy Spirit night and day.

I'd like to think that the leadership decided to have our weekly worship services at 9am because that is the hour when the Holy Spirit filled his people with power from on high—the hour when the Holy Spirit filled their hearts with joy and filled their mouths with praise and evangelistic zeal.

But whether we gather for worship at 9am in English, 11:30 in Spanish, 5:30pm on Saturday—or whenever we gather—we come with these clay vessels empty and ready to be filled. We come to receive exactly what the disciples received that day—strength, joy, praise, and made ready to proclaim to the world the mighty works of God—under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

The disciples came to the temple to pray and worship. We have come here to pray and worship. They came to hear the Scriptures read and a Christ-centered sermon. We have come here to receive the ministry of the Word of God.

Later that day, 3,000 men, women, and children were baptized—the Lord, the Holy Spirit added to their number. Today, God added Abigail to our number. Later that day, the disciples distributed bread and gave thanks. Later this service, we will distribute bread and give thanks for Jesus' true body and blood.

There may be no violent, rushing wind that ushers us into the Holy Spirit activity, but we do have a carillon that chimes us in. We may not have as much diversity as they did on the Day of Pentecost, but our church, St. Paul, is well on her way.

We are under the influence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has already brought us His assurance that our sins are forgiven. He has washed away our sins with the water and the Word. He has brought us the good news of Jesus Christ who lived, died, and rose for us. And He gathers a rich diversity of people from every tribe, nation, tongue, and people.

And we proclaim the mighty works of God. Under the influence of a divine, powerful, and merciful God, we hear and declare to the world what He has done for us through Jesus Christ. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God goes out of our mouths to transform our community and the world. People under the influence can do extraordinary things. And God has promised to do so through us.