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Text: Acts 2:1-21

Tacks and Matches

I walk you into a room and show you a table pressed against the wall. I hand you a candle, a box of thumbtacks, and a book of matches. The directions are simple: Your job is to attach the candle to the wall so the wax doesn't drip onto the table.

Presented with this challenge, people come up with all sorts of half-baked solutions. They try pinning the candle to the wall with a thumbtack; they try melting the wax with the match to make the candle stick. These, of course, don't work.

Some of you may be familiar with the Candle Problem.¹ The psychologist Karl Duncker developed this behavioral test in the 1940s to measure something called functional fixedness. Functional fixedness is our bias to use objects as they are traditionally used. The key to solving the Candle Problem is seeing the box as something more than a receptacle for thumbtacks. Empty out the tacks and pin the box to the wall, and problem solved: you have a candleholder that keeps wax drippings from reaching the table.

Functional fixedness is a reflection of our preference to do things the same old way. Bias in favor of the status quo is very clear in hindsight. Consider how it took the Roman Catholic Church almost 300 hundred years to accept that the sun did not revolve around the earth after Copernicus informed them otherwise. Consider how basketball teams are just recently embracing the statistical advantage of the three-point shot almost 40 years after the NBA introduced it. Consider the years it took me to realize that baggy jeans were no longer stylish.

Identifying one's functional fixedness is much more difficult in real time. Most upholders of the status quo are not inherently worse than other people—they are simply stuck in a profoundly human way. They are in need of inspiration to envision a new way forward.

Pentecost is all about inspiration. The resurrected Jesus awed his followers and promised them guidance after his departure. I imagine the disciples all together in one place and totally befuddled. Just like when a teacher asks a question no one knows the answer too, they surely avoided eye contact, shrugged their shoulders, and sighed—anything to break up their anxiousness about what to do next. Suddenly a rush of violent wind shook their world. Tongues of fire rested upon the apostles, filling them with a new language and vision to share God's vision of peace to the far reaches of the known world. In a single moment, they went from stuck to overflowing with inspiration.

Peter makes sense of the situation through the words of the prophet Joel, announcing to the gathered crowd, "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh." You see, Pentecost is God's reminder that we live in post-Resurrection days. Jesus is risen, and the same Spirit that overcame the violence of the cross with life-giving peace is with us now. Pentecost celebrates the gift of the Holy Spirit, and its power to transform the Church and by extension the entire world.

¹ I learned about the Candle Problem from Dan Pink's 2009 TED Talk, "The Puzzle of Motivation":
https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_pink_on_motivation/transcript

The transformation begins with those of us who have always challenged why things have to be as they are. Again channeling the Prophet Joel, Peter says, "...And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young shall see visions." The verb to prophesy comes from the Greek verb *prophemi*, meaning to speak on behalf of. Confirmands, earlier you affirmed your baptism, the very sign that the Holy Spirit is speaking in your life. As God breathed the Spirit into the Church on Pentecost, it is no accident that Peter identifies God speaking through young people as one of the first signs of the Spirit's presence. For the Church to thrive, we need to hear how God is speaking to you; we need to hear about the visions God has revealed to you.

Since you have now officially become members of First Church, I offered you some gifts to help you share your voice and vision to help nudge us out of our complacency.

The first of these gifts is a pin from my retreat at the Taizé Community in France. The monastic brothers there made the pins in the shape of a dove, a symbol of the peace. The Church desperately needs to reclaim Christ's vision of peace. The violence in our communities, embodied in Friday's massacre in Texas, is at the heart of the problem. The victims were mostly young people like yourselves, as the victims of gun violence so typically are. The discussion of how to do anything about these shootings has become so stuck that too many adults have given up trying to do something about it. They say the same things that get likes on Facebook and around the watercooler, but their actions reflect a hopelessness that simply accepts mass shootings as the cost of living in America.

Such hopelessness is antithetical to the other symbol of your pin. Turn it just a little bit and you can see how it also is shaped like a cross. In Jesus' time, the cross was a sign of senseless and cruel death often reserved for those with the least resources to protect themselves. The authorities saw it as essential for ensuring peace while in reality it did just the opposite. Through his death, Jesus joined in solidarity with the afflicted and resisted the status quo. Through his resurrection, he shows us that God has the power to shape the world as it is in heaven. On Pentecost, God sent that same Spirit that was with Christ to us. When we get stuck believing that there is nothing we can do face the violence of our own culture, speak up. Let the pin remind you that the peace of the dove and the hope of the cross is always with you in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In addition to the Taizé pin, the second gift is a Bible. It is slim with tiny print that is perfect for travelling. I thought it would be fitting as you embark on this new leg of your life journey. Over the past year, each of you have devoted yourselves to studying scripture more deeply. You now have the tools to look to the Bible for the comfort and guidance of the Spirit.

If there comes a time when you are lost and need help, open it up to the very first page. The dedication page reminds you that this Bible is from your First Church Family and where you can always find home. For all the commitments you made here today, remember that we have committed to you, too. Wherever you go and for however long, you always have family here waiting here to welcome you back at First Church. We may miss how God has placed all the tools to solve the problem at hand right in front of us. We certainly get stuck sometimes. Nevertheless, as long as God's people continue to gather in this one place, you can count on the Holy Spirit to nurture and inspire you through this community.

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