

## Loosed!

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Acts 2:1-21  
on June 8, 2025, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC  
I.*

### *Loosed!*

You know the story, this wild Pentecost narrative, one of breath and fire and tongues, one of innumerable languages and proclamation and hearing, one where Spirit fell and rushed on all, one that birthed a church and transformed the shape of the world. “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit,” Acts tells us ALL were filled! — “and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

And best of all, when the Spirit fell, there wasn’t one language the disciples spoke but many. “How is it that we hear,” the bewildered crowd asked, “each of us in our own native language?” Acts gets specific: we’re talking Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” When the Spirit fell, the differences in their mother tongues weren’t eliminated or collapsed into one, but rather proclaimed and understood in their own unique distinctiveness. God’s Spirit poured out and enlivened *particular* languages of *particular* people with *particular* customs, nuances, practices, habits, colloquialisms, sayings, slang, poetry, stories, and memories. Power fell upon particularities and peculiarities, because God and God’s mighty deeds cannot be whittled down and stripped away and homogenized and consolidated.

For you see, as local as God's presence on earth was — one person and one locale in Jesus — God's Spirit is equally global — everywhere, upon all flesh. God in God's depth and height and length and breadth needed the Spirit to infuse humankind in all its boundless variety and vast complexity to become the bearers of the story from then on. With her help, the gospel then moves unhindered through the world. Breaking past barriers of tradition. Upending conventions of race. Moving through suffering. Shifting customs and differences. Liberating the chains that have imprisoned us. With her help, they — we — became the speakers, the proclaimers, the revolutionaries, the witnesses of what God has done and what God continues to do. Quite simply, they — we — became the *church*.

## II.

Pentecost Sunday is the day to tell the story of the global church. But we would be remiss if we missed the opportunity to get particular, peculiar if you will — to tell the story of a particular church, a local church, **our** particular, peculiar local church.

I'm told that people get a bit reflective as they get older. And as I (*ahem*) get older, I must say, as I prepare to mark ten years of serving alongside of you, remarkable church, I find myself thinking back often over these years we've shared. I'll save a full reflection for another time, but as it pertains to us today, you might say that **one could tell the story of our church in this ten-year season by tracing our way through Pentecosts**. And if you'll humor this trip down memory lane, let's remember our story together.

Pentecost Sunday in 2015 was our family's final Sunday in Louisville before making the journey across mountains and miles to make our home here with you in Winston-Salem. And while we journeyed to you, three days

after that Pentecost Sunday, First Baptist on Fifth's Long Range Planning Group presented a report to the congregation that said out loud for the first time that our facilities were unsustainable as they were, and spaces which once enabled ministry were now inhibiting ministry. "You're going to have to do something about the buildings," the Search Committee had said to me then. *Little did we know...*

Pentecost Sunday 2016 was a worship service for the ages, as new red choir robes, new hymnals and pew Bibles, and new paraments brought a splash of color and renewed vibrancy to our worshiping space.

And who could forget Pentecost of 2017? Not only was it the first Sunday for one of our new Associate Pastors, John Thornton, but it was the very day that after 21 months of work, our congregation gathered in Kelly Auditorium to hear a proposal from the Special Committee on Facilities and Mission, picking up where the Long Range Planning Group left off. The proposal offered a plan to radically alter the landscape of our church's physical footprint by tearing down two-thirds of our buildings, restoring and outfitting the one that remained, closing our beloved Children's Center, and reorienting ourselves for sustainable mission and ministry for the future.

A year later in Pentecost 2018, we gathered for the final time in Buildings B & C to mark their meaning in our lives with stones and altars before demolition began. And as if the Holy Spirit wanted to make sure we were really paying attention, we arrived that morning to find that the air conditioning had broken in Building C, prompting us to relocate our final chapel worship in the breezeway lest we roast in the 82-degree chapel.

We were thick into construction work on the back half of our lot on Pentecost 2019, so it seemed to come out of nowhere that just two days

following our resplendent worship, a decorative piece of 100 year-old plaster fell from the dome ceiling. You might remember that some wondered if the brass players who had played that morning had shaken loose the plaster like Joshua and the battle of Jericho! This closed the Sanctuary for our worship for three months and reminded us (yet again!) that a church is not merely a building, a Sanctuary is not the only space in which to worship, and God's Spirit is always, *always* about the work of upending and making new. (And don't ever worry, if ever this building falls down, those pieces of decorative plaster will still be stuck on tight.)

From our homes, we carried the previous year's learning with us as we marked a fearful pandemic Pentecost 2020, just days after our country crossed the threshold of 100,000 covid deaths and George Floyd's murder spurred protests for racial justice that rose up around and within us. Six days after Pentecost, dozens of us gathered downtown to offer a water station for marchers on a hot June day. We all were changed.

Pentecost 2021 will forever be seared in my mind and heart, as that Sunday after 14 months of pandemic worship, apart in body if not in spirit, we regathered in person for worship in our church house and were sent home with wind chimes to pay attention for the Spirit's movement rustling like the wind. That wind was already sweeping within us, as we were right in the midst of a season of discernment about our church's identity. Six months prior, the question, "how is the Spirit of God awakening you?," was our starting point to discuss matters that tend to inflame the heart – human sexuality and race right at the center. And six months later, we decided overwhelmingly that it was time to say publicly in our church's Confession of Identity what we'd long practiced, that, "our love for God and neighbor calls

us to welcome, affirm, and celebrate all people in the fullness of who they are: beloved for their differing ages and races, sexual orientations and gender identities, means and sufferings, physical and mental abilities, levels of education and backgrounds, cultures and nationalities, doubts and beliefs. Why? Because God's love knows no boundaries, therefore our love shouldn't either."

In light of all the rest, Pentecost 2022 and 2023 were a bit ... *normal*? I was with you in Spirit while on sabbatical on Pentecost 2022. Both years, we practiced the ordinary, meaningful rhythms of life together, as we slipped into these pews, sang the hymns of faith and told the stories of Jesus, heard Word proclaimed and good news shared.

Last year on Pentecost 2024, we voted unanimously to welcome Pastor Kyle as a new Associate Pastor for our beloved community. That night, we gathered (as we will tonight!) for our church picnic, packed to the gills with delicious food, dazzling diversity of members, relationships new and old, play and beauty and love above all else. It is still one of my very favorite memories of our life together.

Which brings us to today. Well you'd think by now we'd learn not to pack a Pentecost full! Yet who are we to hinder the movement of the Spirit! Today, amidst all the learning and fellowship and worship and service, we welcome a new pastoral intern, Claudia Amaya, and give thanks for Tina Magee, who retires after 25 remarkable years of caring for our church's babies and raising a generation among us. Tonight, we'll bring our deviled eggs and pound cake and potato casserole again tonight, ready to feast together in a church picnic. And in just a few moments, we'll take another vote – one on how we organize ourselves for God's work of love among us (no

small feat!!), and another to finish off the back part of our church's grounds with a flourish: building beyond the walls and completing what we left undone all those years ago, by once again, extending the gift of communal, beautiful, sacred space to our downtown neighbors. The back half of our lot that has sat, undone, filled with potholes and rocky ground and mud, will soon be transformed. A pavilion for lively outdoor gatherings and meals. A playground for our youngest to play and delight. A columbarium to remember our saints who live on with us. A courtyard and garden for reflection and rest, right in the heart of it all. A covered walkway and driveway to enhance accessibility and hospitality. A parking lot that is both functional and intentional. These spaces will complete our church house and grounds in a way that 2015 First Baptist Church couldn't have even imagined, but 2035 First Baptist Church won't remember how we lived without them.

But our church's story isn't just about the big moments. Because woven all throughout these Pentecosts of the past 10 years is, well, our *life together*. We've worshiped and studied, fellowshiped and served. We've buried saints and married lovers, welcomed newcomers and dedicated babies, traveled to serve around the world and just across the street, marked anniversaries and worshiped in every season. Ministries have begun and ended. People have come and gone. Spaces and staff have changed.

Yet despite all that has changed, what has remained, what has been renewed over and over again, what rings true with us today and in all the days to come, is the Spirit's call to be "a community in the heart of the city called by Jesus to practice bold love of God and neighbor and boundless compassion for all people." That meant being here, together. Understanding that sacred space matters, not just for a church but for a city. Covenanting to keep our

presence and witness on Fifth Street alive and well, for generations to come. Doing the hard and holy work of being together in place.

A simplistic read on these years might be that we've been fiddling with our buildings for a decade. But that would be woefully incomplete. Because I hope you hear how we've wrestled with place and purpose. How we've wrestled with the Spirit's call to stay or to go, to tear down or to build up, to pluck or to plant. How we've wrestled with where we are, but also how we are and who we are. How we've wrestled with what it means to be together in place, but also with what it means to go together into the world. Like Jacob at the River Jabbok, there have certainly been seasons when wrestling with God's Spirit left us walking with a limp, but like Jacob, never have we walked without God's blessing.

Because that's what happens when the Spirit gets involved. She moves and rushes and blows and is loosed upon the world, and nothing is left unchanged. Churches are born, and born again. Some contract, some expand, new birth is brought into life. They fall down, and fail, and have to ask for forgiveness. What dies finds new life. What ends winds toward new beginnings. Resurrection and reconciliation and renovation and restoration, all in fullest measure.

Friends, I believe now more than ever that First Baptist Church on Fifth is uniquely called and powerfully equipped to be the church God calls us to be. Our church house and grounds are but one piece of that, of course. Our people – you! – are the vessels. You are the heart. You are the very best part of who we are. And the One who is breath, and fire, and living water, and Love made flesh – is who draws us together and makes us one, who gives us the good news to proclaim in our local, particular, peculiar way, from this place to

the ends of the earth. If the church began when the Holy Spirit was loosed among 12 scared people in a locked room and changed the world through them, just think how the Holy Spirit might change the world through us!<sup>1</sup>

20 years from now, 50 years from now, 100 years from now, who knows what our descendants of First Baptist Church on Fifth will say about this decade of our history. But my prayer is that we will be found faithful. That they'll look back upon an imperfect-yet-hopeful people following the call of the Holy Spirit with their whole hearts and their very lives. That as they peel back the pages of this history, they'll feel the holy wind of the Holy Spirit set loose in and through this place. That they'll hear through us, just as we've heard from the Holy Spirit, the summons into God's work of Love so broad, so vast, so transformative, it scrambles languages and topples expectations, never leaving a one or a season behind.

### III.

The late Rachel Held Evans understood it when she said this: "the church is not a group of people who believe all the same things; the church is a group of people caught up in the same story, with Jesus at the center."<sup>2</sup> That's our story, friends. That's your story. That's who we are. That's our life together. The church is at her best when Jesus is right at the center, when the Holy Spirit is loosed right at the heart, when God and God's boundless Love is right in the marrow of our essence.

Then and only then, might we rise and say, "now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we could ask or imagine, to God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever, amen!"

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<sup>1</sup> Sam Wells, *How to Preach: Times, Seasons, Texts and Contexts*, p173.

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired*, p157.