

Keep Church Weird

*A sermon preached on Acts 2:1-21 on Pentecost Sunday, May 24, 2026,
by Emily Hull McGee with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

As one local journalist noted, it was the phrase that launched a thousand bumper stickers. Tossed off by Austin Community College's librarian, Red Wassenich, when he called into his local radio station with a donation back in 2000, the host of KOOP's afternoon show asked him why he gave. "I don't know," Red replied. "It helps keep Austin weird." And it stuck. In that distinctly Texan city, Red was thinking of markers like the Indian food truck that everyone loved, the dive bar that leaves up Christmas decorations all year long, or even the famous Cathedral of Junk, a 32-foot structure built over 20 years with bicycle frames and colorful bottles and air conditioning vents and the like.¹ But the saying caught on. So when a Borders Bookstore (remember those?) set its eyes on Austin, the local bookstore called BookPeople printed up 5000 "Keep Austin Weird" stickers to encourage residents to keep shopping locally. It worked! That Borders never was built.²

Not to be outdone, the phrase was borrowed later by Portland, Louisville, and Indianapolis as unofficial city slogans. When I moved to Louisville, "Keep Louisville Weird" stickers were everywhere in the Highlands – proudly stuck on cash registers at the dozen or more local coffee shops within about a two mile stretch, placed on a billboard outside Ear X-tacy, the beloved (and dearly departed) record shop, displayed in the store windows of

¹ Joe Yonan, "Can Austin Stay Weird," The Washington Post, March 27, 2011, https://web.archive.org/web/20131104105819/http://www.northjersey.com/travel/destinations_us/118728504_Can_Austin_stay_weird_.html?page=all

² Kelsey Thompson, "What's the origin behind the 'Keep Austin Weird' slogan?," May 1, 2023, <https://www.kxan.com/news/local/austin/whats-the-origin-behind-the-keep-austin-weird-slogan/>

the not one, not two, but *three* vacuum cleaner stores in a half mile block of each other that somehow were always in business. The spirit would kick up every time a corporate business would squeeze their way in, like the Panera Bread which landed next to everyone's favorite live music venue and the roller derby rink. Heaven forbid a Starbucks try to find a spot! Not even the spoofs could quell that spirit, like "Make Austin Normal," or "Keep Portland Wired," or "Make Louisville Weirder." These particular peculiarities in a local environment are precisely what gives a place its flair, what defines its identity and individuality, what countercultural impulses and quirks create expression, what makes these communities, well, *weird*.

II.

Churches aren't all that different. We may not have towers of junk (or maybe we do!), but the church is surely particular. Not just a local church, but the various types of churches and communities of Christians who find their way into community with one another. Catholics, Orthodox, Episcopalians, and Lutherans have bishops and baby baptisms and "smells and bells." Pentecostals speak in tongues, and Presbyterians self-describe as "the frozen chosen." Churches of Christ don't use instruments in worship, while non-denominational churches likely have loud electric guitars and drums. United Methodists center the experience of grace, while Anabaptists center the commitment to peace. And to quote one of our Baptist heroes, James Dunn, who loved a quintessentially Baptist conviction, "ain't no one gonna tell me what to believe but Jesus." Despite what some might claim, not a one of us has the fullest picture of how to live as a disciple of Jesus. Each of our emphases reveal something about the Spirit of God at work in and through our differences.

Our weirdness isn't just in the various branches off the Christian family tree, but in the particular practices we do. Think about it: in churches all around the world, people who may wildly disagree with each other on politics, from wildly different backgrounds and worldviews, representing a host of races, ethnicities, genders, sexualities, abilities, means, with beliefs and doubts that vary from one to the next, they intentionally are in beloved community with each other. And if that's not bizarre enough, when we're together, we do things that must seem to the casual observer as rather odd! We sit in these pews, and sing together these hymns, and read words that are thousands of years old like they actually matter and have something to teach us. Every so often in here, we eat a bite of bread and drink a swig of juice and somehow are nourished deeply by it. In this place, we even dunk people in water – at their initiative! We sit by hospital beds, and bless babies, and mourn the dead, and share meals, and volunteer our time and energy, and talk through hard things, and celebrate love in every form. We practice love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And we do these things regularly! We inconvenience ourselves *on purpose* on Sunday mornings! We leave our warm homes and cozy couches, and put on clothes that are surely less comfortable than our sweatpants, and drive downtown to a place that doesn't even have a parking lot right now, and occasionally have awkward interactions with people because, you know, people are people, and all of us can be weird from time to time!

Why in the world would we do these things? What could possibly hold together as broad and diverse a coalition of people as those who sanctuaries all around the world every single week?

III.

The story's weird, I'll tell you. It's one of breath and fire and tongues, a story of innumerable languages and proclamation and hearing. It's a story where Spirit fell and rushed on all, a story that birthed a church and transformed the shape of the world. When the day of Pentecost had come, Acts tells us, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit." ALL were filled! — sons and daughters, young and old, bound and free — "and all began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." It was so odd, people assumed they had to be drunk in order to do it!

Who was that "all" here? Acts gets specific! You heard me stumble over their names: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Phrygians, Pamphilians, and the list goes on and on. All of them — distinct, particular, different — yet now filled with this wild Spirit just the same. For 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?" 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 as local as God's presence on earth was — one person in one locale at one time and place — God in God's depth and height and length and breadth needed humankind in all its boundless variety and vast complexity and *weirdness* to become the bearers of the story from then on.

And that right there, that's how it happened, that's how from many, they became one. Not sanding down their differences, but finding unity amidst them. Not insisting they remain individualistic and alone, but becoming a whole much greater than the sum of its parts. On their own, one vacuum store is just a vacuum store – but three becomes a statement! On their own, each quirky independent business is doing its thing, but together, they form a culture big enough to define a city. On their own, an Elamite and an Egyptian, or a Pentecostal and a Presbyterian are distinct. But together, through the power of the Holy Spirit, they – we – became the speakers, the proclaimers, the prophets, the revolutionaries, the witnesses of what God is doing. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, they – we – became *the church*.

IV.

It's not easy either, this holding distinctiveness while forging togetherness. Of that first Pentecost, preacher Peter Gomes said, "the gift of understanding did not diminish the diversity of that great crowd; the people did not cease to be Medes, Persians, and Elamites. They were not reduced to some vague generality without past or place. No, they did not become less than they were, they became more than they had been, for they became at one with all of those who heard and understood that God was alive and active in this world and eager that they, all of them, should participate in [God's] purposes." And listen right here: "It is the reality of the particular that makes the universal so powerful and appealing."³ Or, as Sam Wells said, "the real conversation is not about where we're each separately coming from. It's about where we're together going."⁴

³ Peter Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, p100.

⁴ Samuel Wells, *How to Preach: Times, Seasons, Texts and Contexts*, p175.

I had a conversation with one of you a few months ago, when you asked me about a deeply-held belief of yours that you perceived differed from many of the rest of us. “How can I still be a part?” you asked me. And I’ll credit the Holy Spirit, because in that moment, my mind filled with the ways that we each hold deeply-held beliefs differently, but still in common. Roper and I don’t agree on the specifics of the end times (but you should sit in her Sunday School class when she teaches Revelation!). Kelly and I see differently the purposes of interfaith relations. Fran still looks down on us from her heavenly home, and insists that none of us are reading our church newsletter regularly and clearly enough! On and on I could go, but the thing I said to you is what y’all heard me say plenty of times before. Though we may not be of one mind, and though we fail and forgive our way into it, we are wholly committed to being of one heart.

Everything about this age in which we live would say this commitment is not just weird, it’s impossible. Unsustainable. Unconvincing. Offensive, even! But 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, right here for you and me.

Weird? Sure. Wondrous? No question.

V.

To that wonder, we hear from St. John of Damascus: “To me who am but black cold charcoal, grant, o Lord, that by the fire of Pentecost, I may be set ablaze.”⁵

Amen!

⁵ St. John of Damascus, *With All God's People: The New Ecumenical Prayer Cycle*.