

Ecclesia Spiritus, Part 6: Ecclesia of Spirit

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Scripture: Acts 2:1-17

I. Drunk?

“They’re drunk on cheap wine.” That’s what onlookers concluded about Jesus’s disciples and others caught up in the Holy Spirit’s wildfire on the day of Pentecost – the Jewish festival that takes place 50 days after Passover, a little less than two months after the first Easter. When it comes to the prospect of having an ecstatic experience of the Divine, I find people generally have two reactions. One says, “Uh, no thanks.” The other says, “Whatever pill they just took, I’ll take two of them!”

In his viral YouTube video, “The Mystical Experience,” Jason Sylva offers nine characteristics that tend to be true of mystical experiences no matter what faith tradition they are experienced within, and even when experienced by those who adhere to no particular tradition at all. I think these nine traits offer us a pretty clear window into the experience of Pentecost by the disciples and those who got caught up in the Holy Spirit’s blaze. *[Note to reader: Jason Silva’s 4-min. video can be found here: <http://bit.ly/2qKIGqi>.]*

These characteristics are:

- (1) Feelings of cosmic unity/oneness with everything.
- (2) A sense of transcendence of time and space.
- (3) A positive mood lifting/bliss/ecstasy.
- (4) Feelings of the sacred and/or connection with the divine.
- (5) Ineffability – the experience can’t be put into words because it is beyond words.
- (6) Paradoxicality – one can hold multiple, seemingly contradictory perspectives in one’s mind at once, such as God’s utter transcendence and God’s imminence and intimacy.
- (7) A fleeting quality. The experience suddenly emerges then dissolves just as quickly.
- (8) The experience provokes transformative change. It may last a moment but forever changes a person. “I once was blind, but now I see ...”
- (9) A noetic flavor. The experience strikes the person as having deeper veracity than everyday reality.

When you pack all of these characteristics into a single experience, it is no wonder that an onlooker might conclude that the people caught up in the

experience are drunk or high. That kind of bliss pretty much overwhelms the brain's circuitry for a bit.

When Acts tells us that people from other countries heard the disciples speaking in their own language, I think that what really happened was not that the disciples suddenly started speaking Swahili, Coptic, and other human languages, but that they were reacting to an experience that is so far beyond what words can convey that they were “drunkenly babbling” in the interpretation of some, but were actually making the sounds of raw, unprocessed *feelings* that any human being can understand, no matter what their nationality or language. How much translation does a crying baby need, or a laughing one? Now imagine the sounds that someone might make when all nine of those common qualities of mystical experience hit a person. Those sounds may be hard to imagine, but if you heard them coming out of a person I have little doubt you would *feel* what you were hearing and therefore understand. The technical term for this kind of speech is *glossolalia*, otherwise known as “speaking in tongues.” It’s an experience that the New Testament tells us used to happen regularly in the early church.

For whatever reason, I have experienced the kind of mystical ecstasy akin to that of Pentecost twice in my life – once in 1981 and then again last August on the Oregon Coast. Both times the experience lasted for mere minutes and had all the characteristics that Jason Silva talks about. And the experience left me babbling like someone drunk on cheap wine ...

Yet as dramatic as these experiences were for me, what became crystal clear in their aftermath is that the power that is capable of producing such ecstasy is fully present in the most minute and unassuming of spiritual experiences. Spiritual experience kind of works like fractal geometry: the macrocosm can be found in the microcosm. The pattern you find in the largest, grandest settings is quite similar to the pattern you find when you zoom in to the smallest, minutest of levels. What this means is that, while you may not feel like you’ve ever had an experience even remotely as grand as the disciples had on Pentecost Sunday, you are actually experiencing the same power that fueled the Pentecost experience on a regular basis. In fact, if you were to step out of the fray and slow down your life enough to quietly savor the experiences that keep coming to you, you would find that many of them contain the very same qualities of profound mystical experiences, just in smaller, more subtle form – which is therefore more easy to overlook and pass by if you’re not paying attention.

Would you like to experience the very Spirit of Pentecost today? Then try this.

Picture yourself outside on this warm, sunny day. Perhaps you’ve been in a hurry, rushing to get to church on time, then rushing to perform a few errands before the weekend is over. Now, pause for a few moments, take in the view of

your surroundings, then close your eyes and simply let the sun beat down on your face.

It's amazing how much differently we experience the sun when we close our eyes, isn't it? The sun is shining outside, but now, having cleared away the world's distractions, the sun begins to go to work on the *inside*. "Haaaaaaa, this feels so good," we say to ourselves. "Haaaaaaa, my concerns don't seem quite as distressing in this moment ..." "Haaaaaaa, more than just the sun seems to be touching me. Something is touching me inside, not just outside ..." "Haaaaaa, I could spend eternity right here in this moment ..."

Then the thought of the errands you are supposed to be running invades that moment of eternity, you open your eyes, and you go on with your day. But what if you didn't rush off to those errands and simply allowed yourself to be in the moment a bit longer? Think of Jason Silva's list of characteristics of the mystical. As that sun continues to warm you, what of his list is not present within you? A feeling of oneness ... a sense of transcendence of time and space ... a positive mood lifting ... a feeling of the sacred that has no need or use for words ... a feeling like this moment is more real than the many moments before it when you were rushing to complete your errands ... and if the sun is really sinking deeply inside you, perhaps you are even experiencing two seemingly paradoxical thoughts at once: that as much as the world continues to act in ways you do not approve of, there is nevertheless something deeply right about the world that defies your ability to express or understand.

You don't need to have an experience as bombastic as the disciples had on Pentecost Sunday to connect deeply and intimately with what happened to them. It's quite easy, really. And it's *supposed* to be easy. It's *supposed* to be easy because God wants to be in relationship with each and every one of us. And it's *supposed* to be easy so that the only one who will ever decide *not* to be in relationship with God is you, not God. God has made this relationship easier than falling off a log. It is we who keep making the relationship more complicated, mostly by convincing ourselves that we have more "important" things to do than stand around allowing the sun to shine in our faces. What use do we have for eternity when we're on a tight time schedule?

If you're truly aware of what's going on, you may even move on with your errands to avoid acting strangely, knowing what can happen if you allow that sunshine on your face to sink too deeply into your soul. Onlookers might notice the ecstatic smile on your face, and the way your body begins to sway back and forth as you feel lighter and freer. They may hear the sighs, grunts, and groans you begin to emit when wave after wave of gratitude hits you. They may very well conclude that you're drunk!

If this should ever happen to you, just tell them, "I'm just having a Pentecost moment." I doubt this will change their mind about you, but if you let moments

like these continue very long, they will change you. You will realize that in a world that is so deeply out of sync with God and their inner selves, those who are even slightly in sync with themselves and their God will appear a bit weird, even threatening. In other words, you'll always seem like a bit of a misfit in this world if you allow the sun to shine on your face overly long. But is it really your goal to fit well into the society's dysfunction?

II. Spirited!

Take a deep breath, hold it for a second or two, and then release it slowly. Do it once more. Again, one more time.

Now ask yourself: What is different about how you are feeling now versus before you participated in this little breath exercise? My guess is that you are slightly more relaxed, slightly more peaceful, and your mood has shifted ever so slightly in a positive, more euphoric direction. My guess, as well, is that while you may not have experienced all the things that Jason Silva talks about in his nine characteristics of mystical experience, if you were to elongate the experience you just had so that every microsecond of it were clearly in view, you would, in fact, discover that you experienced all those mystical characteristics. You simply experienced them so subtly and rapidly that they combined into a single experience that is really beyond words but that you might describe as something akin to "peaceful release" or "gentle joy."

One of the primary metaphors for the Holy Spirit – one that can be found in many of the great spiritual traditions of the world, not just Christianity – is that of breath. In Hebrew, *ruach* can mean breath or spirit. In Greek, the word *pneuma* can mean either as well. Even in the pre-Christian tradition of Hawaii, the word for God and the word for breath are the same. They pronounce this word, HA, spoken as an exhalation of breath (like we do in those spirit-moments – "Haaaaaa"). In fact this connection between breath and the divine is so pervasive throughout the world that one wonders if it is a metaphor at all. Like, perhaps breath and spirit are one and the same thing.

Whatever is the case, what I love about relating the Holy Spirit to breath is that today you and I will have taken approximately 26,000 breaths, yet been entirely unaware of any of them until something called our attention to our breath. How many of you were aware of your breathing, for instance, until I called your attention to your breath just moments ago. That's so like the Holy Spirit! Always there, always in the background, always involved with us so intimately that we actually could not live without it, yet so present and familiar as to remain hidden and mysterious much of the time.

One of the reasons why many, if not all, of the great meditative traditions in the world emphasize paying attention to your breath and taking at least a few deep

breaths at the beginning of meditation is because if you pay attention to how you feel when you release your breath, you also sensitize yourself to divine guidance.

Here's what I mean: You may get that feeling of "peaceful release" or "gentle joy" at other times than just when you're paying attention to your breath. There are times when perhaps you experience this feeling when you are engaged in a conversation with a friend, or doing something in particular at work, or have chosen to do one thing over another. When you get this feeling of "peaceful release" or "gentle joy," it is one of the hallmarks of connecting with the Holy Spirit, especially when it returns repeatedly. These are times when your will and God's will are connected.

If you will pay careful attention to these feelings, you will find that they act like breadcrumbs in the Dark Wood of life, gently guiding you along a path that is best for you. When we pray, with Jesus, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," this is how we know that we are being guided by the Holy Spirit to accomplish God's will. We keep getting those feelings like we get when we pay attention to our breath even when we're not paying attention to our breath!

Yes, following God's will is just this easy – as easy as breathing. It's we who complicate it. We complicate it because what makes us feel free and easy when we're in sync with the Holy Spirit is generally considered incompatible with the dysfunctional world that has lost its connection to the Divine. The reverse is true as well, what a dysfunctional world considers "the easy way" often proves to be the hardest, most painful way for us to go. An obvious example of the latter is when people think that drinking excessively or taking drugs will make it easier to deal with their problems. How well does that work, for *anyone*?

Okay, but what is an example of the former, you ask – a time when something seems impossible to the rest of the world but is as easy as breathing to those who are in touch with the Spirit? I can offer you a dramatic example of such an experience – an example so large that it is literally biblical in size and importance for the world. It's an experience most of you are intimately familiar with because Countryside is steeped in it.

How much of the world would say that Jews, Christians, and Muslims intentionally co-locating together in order to learn what it means for the three faiths to exist in peace, harmony, and mutual respect is a nice hope but impossible dream? Truly, this is an impossible dream – impossible unless the Holy Spirit is specifically calling you to do it. Then it's no longer impossible, but as easy as breathing. As easy as following those breadcrumbs in the Dark Wood of life that keep producing sensations of "peaceful release" and "gentle joy" even when the woods around look dark and scary.

Friends, what is happening right here in Omaha is directly connected to God's will to change more than just Omaha. It is connected to God's will

for the world to change in the very direction we are changing. It is literally connected to a new and fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit that is moving many in our world right now but is being given most concrete expression (for the moment) right here in Omaha. Likely, what is happening is connected to God's intention to steer the planet away from a devastating course and into one of the greatest spiritual renewals the three faiths have ever experienced.

Of course, we're not going to accomplish all this. The Christians of Pentecost didn't accomplish all that God intended for the world, either. They simply set God's will for the world in motion.

You may not think that what we are doing here in little old Omaha is as grand or important as I've just characterized it. If so, consider this question: If there was a community of people who suddenly became "drunk on the Spirit" just like the disciples did on Pentecost Sunday, showing all the evidence that they were truly experiencing the Spirit and not just drunk or high, and then that community began to joyfully form a Tri-Faith Initiative and proclaim that we are all worshipping the same God, would you not think, "Oh, my God! God is up to something huge – biblical, even!"

The pyrotechnics of Pentecost may not have lead Countryside, or Temple Israel, or the American Muslim Institute to doing what we are doing together. But we have all been following the Spirit of Pentecost, one free and easy breath at a time. This tells me that as chaotic and dysfunctional as the world may get as time moves on, we can expect that our experience of life will be marked more by moments in which we experience the warmth of God's eternal Light than by moments of darkness or despair. And those who oppose what we are doing will be continually scratching their heads, asking why all three communities are so darned happy so much of the time. These onlookers may even say, "They're drunk on cheap wine."