

Spirit and Serendipity

Acts 2:1-21

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We've been celebrating Pentecost, the day the church was really born through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It was the day the gospel of Jesus broke through and the church was sent out on mission. Our church, like every church, depends on the Spirit for life. Without the Spirit, we have no life and are one more social club, a nice group but not the church. The Swiss theologian Emil Brunner famously said early in the 20th century, "The church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning." If we are not on mission with tasks that Jesus has sent us to do, we are not the church. Just as no burning, no fire, no mission, no church.

I want to talk about the Spirit's role in the mission of the church on her birthday—and a significant birthday for Harbor Church, 60 years in this sanctuary. I'm coming close to the 35th anniversary of my ordination, and there are two things I've learned in 35 years of ministry:

1. The Spirit works by serendipity, and
2. The measure of success in mission is "Are we making a difference in our neighborhood?"

A serendipity is a happy accident; it is "finding something good while you weren't looking for it. The word serendipity was created by Horace Walpole in the 1750's. He formed it from a Persian fairy tale called "The Three Princes of Serendip," "whose heroes were always making discoveries of things they were not in quest of."

A related term is "synchronicity," a word coined by Carl Jung in the 1920's. Synchronicity is the experience of two or more things occurring at the same time that are not causally related and unlikely to happen together, experienced as occurring together in a meaningful manner. A popular way of saying this might be "With God there are no coincidences." Jung became convinced that life is not a series of random events but an expression of a deeper order.

When the Spirit is at work, things just happen that you don't expect and weren't looking for. Becca's a big Sci Fi fan, and she used to watch that Canadian show called *Stargate* [actually there was *Stargate SG1*, *Stargate Universe*, and *Stargate3 Atlantis*]. In every show, all of a sudden a shimmering oval opening would appear—a stargate—and if you walked through it you would find yourself in another time and place, perhaps in another dimension. That's the way the Spirit works, by opening a stargate right in front of us when we aren't even looking for it.

Consider what happens in the book of Acts. In chapter 2, the disciples weren't looking to expand the message of Jesus to other countries, but the Spirit presented an opportunity. Because it was a major holiday, Jews had come to Jerusalem from all over the known world. When the Spirit came, it just *happened* that people were there in the same place and witnessed the miracle of speaking in other languages.

Chapter 8 is a great example of serendipity. The Spirit leads Philip to the road south of Jerusalem that leads to Gaza through the desert. He doesn't know why he is there. But along comes a chariot and in it is a black man reading the scroll of Isaiah. It's an Ethiopian, a long way from home. Philip asks what he is reading. It's Isaiah 53, about the sheep led to slaughter. "Who's this about?" the African asks, and Philip tells him the story of Jesus who died for us.

Chapter 10 may be even wilder. Peter is in Joppa (Tel Aviv) on a flat rooftop patio praying. Because he is hungry, Peter has a dream about a sheet full of food—all kinds of animals, some animals that Jews are not allowed to eat. In the dream he hears a voice say "Kill and eat... What God has called clean do

not call unclean.” Peter wakes up, and ordinarily he would think the dream was saying something about moving beyond kosher laws.

But just then there is a knock on the door. It is representatives of a Roman officer several hours away in Caesarea. They have come to ask Peter to come to speak to their master about God. Then Peter knows that this is a synchronicity. He wasn’t looking for it, but God was opening a stargate for mission. The dream was *not* about food; it was about not calling the Gentiles unclean, because they too want to hear about Jesus.

That’s the way the Spirit has worked in ministry throughout my life. The Spirit can’t be put in a strategic plan or even a vision statement. Most of what I have “accomplished” (if you can call it that) was by serendipity, by happy accident, not by planning. It was by accidents caused by the Spirit.

In 1980 I was assigned to the University of Alabama medical school in Birmingham to start a ministry where there was none. None of the traditional models of evening gatherings and Bible studies would work for medical students. I met a Baptist dean in the med school and he told me that for the first two years med school is like high school. Everyone is in the same class, on the same schedule, with the same lunch break. A light went on: let’s give them lunch, and Dean, you can be the first speaker. From that week on we had free food at the Baptist Student Center every Wednesday, and a different Christian doctor or health professional spoke each week. We had *no* ministry to med students, but all of a sudden more than 50% of the med school enrollment was attending lunches at the Baptist Student Center to think about medicine and faith. Yeah, my boss thought I was a genius, but I’m telling you it was all the Spirit.

When I got to Columbia University to start a ministry where there was no Baptist presence at all, I went to an interfaith clergy meeting. The director of the International Student Office—herself pretty new—came to meet with the clergy. She said, “We need people to help international students adjust to life in New York. Most of them don’t know anybody. It would be great if we could find local ‘hosts’ for them to welcome them and invite them to a meal.” No one said a word, so I raised my hand. “Hey, I’m new and I don’t have anything else to do. I’ll work on it.” As it happened—I would say miraculously—Georgia Baptists decided to fund an intern for me from the University of Georgia, and I put her to work full time with international students. Columbia sent letters to incoming new international students offering a relationship with a local family, and 400 signed up! Now we really had to find some families! But it happened. We started a daily international student tea, a group for international moms and toddlers, a Thanksgiving dinner for 200, and lots of wonderful relationships. All because of a serendipity of the Spirit. When God opens that stargate, you just gotta walk through.

When I was in an urban church in Northern Kentucky near Cincinnati, a man came to speak at my church who was a pastor in Louisville. He’d grown up in my church, which is why I invited him. He had seen churches, probably including mine, mostly focused on building up the church—attendance, budgets, programs. But the Spirit led him to think: What difference is my church making in my neighborhood? What difference would it make if my church ceased to exist? That, he said, is how you measure success—by the difference you make in the neighborhood, not by the usual measures of institutional success. I was convicted and began to focus on that work.

We had tried a fall festival as an outreach to neighborhood kids, with free games and prizes, and it drew about 200. Not bad. But when I got involved with the local neighborhood Chamber of Commerce (the only minister who ever did), I discovered that they were thinking about reviving a Halloween party they had back in the 50’s and 60’s. I saw a serendipity of the Spirit. I said, “Let’s *partner* on that. You can hold the party on our parking lot, two or three acres. Let’s get merchants to donate prizes, get Catholic Charities to sponsor booths, bring in the school, scouts, whoever we can.” The next year the Fall Festival held on a Saturday with a costume contest drew 4,000 people. It drew 4-5,000 as long as I

stayed there, and built countless bridges to people in the neighborhood. Besides that, everybody learned that the Baptist church was the one that cared about the neighborhood as a whole.

The Spirit opens a stargate and we walk through. We developed a partnership with the neighborhood school which had 90% free lunch kids. We'd had a Wednesday night Bible club for kids for a few years, but we realized that (1) we needed to transport kids the few blocks to the church, and (2) we needed to feed them. They were hungry. We got our ladies cooking, and before long we had 50-60 elementary kids every week.

At the end of the school year we wanted to keep the club going. The school had a summer day program for kids but in the summer it would have to close at 2:00 instead of 5:00 (as the after-school program closed during the school year) because they didn't have enough budget. I scratched my head. If the kids all went home at 2:00, we couldn't get them back for supper and Bible club. How could we pick them up at 2:00 and occupy them until 5:00?

I'd recently joined the Sierra Club and was getting into exploring hiking trails in the Cincinnati park system—which is awesome, by the way. So the Spirit said, "Take them hiking." OK, we sent info home offering a summer hiking program from 2 to 5 on Wednesday afternoon—and 50-60 kids showed up to hike—filled our bus and van and then some. And some of them were new to Bible club, so supper and Bible club grew to close to 100. It was a serendipity of the Spirit. If a door opens, walk through it.

Here at Harbor Church I'm still depending on the Spirit to produce such serendipities. The coffeehouse is an example. At a Board meeting we'd talked about a possible coffeehouse as a way to reach out to adults—I'd done it in other locations. But at the next meeting of the Prevention Task Force, someone asked, "What can we do for adults? All our programs are for youth. How about a non-alcoholic place to hang out, like a coffeehouse?" Bingo! Synchronicity of the Spirit. Three years later we are still doing the coffeehouse, with ups and downs, but this past Friday we had about 30 people there from the Block Island community (you'd be surprised who) and from New Hampshire, New York, Connecticut, and Puerto Rico.

The birth of the Mental Health Task Force is totally serendipity. It started because we had a poetry reading at the coffeehouse and Lisa Starr's protégés came. I read a poem called "The Death Expert" about how people expect a pastor to know all about death—and how it feels to be in that role. Months later I got a call from police dispatch: "Chief Carlone is on his way to tell a family that we found the body of their son and brother dead in the woods, stabbed by his own hand. You're a death expert. Could you go?"

Pat Campbell poured out her story of how they could not get help for Ross. That led to a letter to the paper and many responses. That led to the creation of a Mental Health Task Force. We made a little progress, but then at Roll Call Dinner a Jewish neuroscientist—Betty Lincoln cared for his mother—came up to me and said he'd read about our efforts. The next day he called his friend who headed the National Institute of Mental Health in Maryland, who told him to call the medical director at Butler Hospital in Providence, who turned out to have done his residency in an isolated rural area of Vermont with some of the same problems as Block Island. He wanted to help. The neuroscientist, Mike Brownstein, gave us \$23,000 to get a program started to offer consultations with psychiatric residents from Brown University. Does anybody doubt this was a serendipity of the Spirit?

One aside: Some of you think that the Mental Health Task Force and even the coffeehouse are Steve's projects. No, they are not. They are our *church's* ministry to our community. They are the ways the Spirit has opened a stargate for Harbor Church to walk through. If you're not walking through it—if you think it's just for Steve and a few of his buds to walk through—you are missing what the Spirit has for you as part of this church.

When I first got here almost four years ago now, I was thinking of the programs at our elementary school in Kentucky, and I asked if the church did any programs with the school. Blank stares. No, some of us have individual things we do at school as volunteers. Harbor Church members are involved in the community as individuals, but we are not involved *as a church*. But that was and is just my question: What is the *church* doing? Of course the answer was “nothing”—in relation to the school. Back to the old question: If Harbor Church ceased to exist, would it make a difference to the community—as long as someone kept the building available for groups to use? The question is not just what difference are Harbor Church members as individual citizens making in the community, but what difference is Harbor Church as the body of Christ making in the community in a way that is evidently the work of Christ and his Spirit?

Two more examples of serendipity: It’s a tragic one, but the death of Gregor Smith presented an open door for the church. Bob Smith announced that the service would be here at the church without even asking the church. No problem. I contacted him and was able to help with the funeral—even though it was a non-Christian funeral. The next week, I was thinking about what we as a church could do to help address the problem of drug abuse on the island—and believe me, I was just thinking about the tragedy of one 21 year old, I had no idea of the size of the problem. It occurred to me that because the church is home to the Prevention Task Force and the Mental Health Task Force, and because the funeral was here, we were in a unique position to call together concerned people—including police, medical center, school, and others. The Friday meetings have been incredible in opening up “a tough nut to crack”—or “opening up a can of worms,” depending on your view. I’m convinced it was the Spirit opening that door and presenting the church with its mission on a silver platter. If the Spirit opens the stargate, walk through.

One last example: At the end of last summer, Patrick asked our seminary intern Kadin to give our Board his evaluation of his ministry over the summer. Kadin told us that he thought that based on his experience a ministry to the foreign workers would be more fruitful than the summer rec center for the youth. Hmmm. We’d have to think about it.

Months later, we were interviewing for a new church secretary. One applicant was a gigantic Peruvian bouncer named Raul. He had worked arranging housing for foreign workers for years. He knew all about their problems in getting adjusted. Patrick and Cindy and I looked at each other and almost said “Holy...*Spirit!*” We forgot about the secretary job and talked about potential ministries with internationals.

Raul just got back to the island last week. I talked to him about a job, using the seminary intern money to pay him to coordinate a drop in center for international workers in our basement. We’d offer free Wi-Fi and Skype. We’d help then get cheap prepaid phones and used bikes. We’d work with them on immigration issues. We’d provide weekly meals for fellowship and meeting church folks. Wednesday the Executive Board approved the plan. Yesterday the Roosa Fund voted to chip in \$3900 to help it happen.

It’s the Spirit. That is what church is about, what Pentecost began. The church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning. Walking through the door the Spirit opens is what makes the church the church. Let’s be the church.