

## I'd Rather Be a Settler

Acts 1:8 and 5: 1-10  
Joshua 3: 9-17

You may be wondering about the title for today's sermon: "I'd rather be a settler." It's not my preferred title. I would much rather have it read "Determined to be a Pioneer" or "Prepared to Pioneer." The title as printed may, sadly, be the more honest.

Let me try to explain, by referencing a book called *Western Theology*. The book, written by an Episcopalian priest named Wes Seeliger, is not some dull academic history tracing theological doctrine in the western church. Rather, it is a brash, stinging satire written about the state of the church in North America. Seeliger uses the imagery of the Old Wild West to contrast two different approaches to being the people of God. The one approach is that of the settlers, who he portrays as being closed, faithless and definitely unadventurous. Pioneers, on the other had, are characterized as being bold, full of daring trust and ready to leave everything behind no matter how dangerous the journey in order to reach the golden new horizon.

In particular, in terms of how the two groups view the Holy Spirit, Seeliger suggests that settlers see the Holy Spirit as a saloon girl, but a decidedly upright and proper saloon girl – one who could respectfully teach Sunday School the morning after the night before. Some of you may remember the old television show, *Gunsmoke*, and Miss Kitty, who was, for a saloon girl, really quite genteel and not very scandalous at all. In the same way, the Holy Spirit in Seeliger's satire is named Miss Dove and she works at the Olive Branch Saloon. She entertains the settlers who come in looking for a little quiet and peace of mind. Norman Spill, the bartender, serves up warm milk while Miss

Dove goes from table to table, singing her gentle songs. She is "The Nightingale of Settler City – Miss Dove, the comforter."

In pioneer theology, however, the Holy Spirit is seen as the Buffalo Hunter, Wild Red. The Buffalo Hunter is wild, tough and untamable. Red eats barbecued rattlesnake, provides fresh meat to the pioneers and regularly rides into town hollerin' like a madman astride his giant, rangy buffalo named Old Pentecost. He scares the daylights out of the settlers who run for cover whenever Old Red shows up in town. They want nothing to do with the Buffalo Hunter. They shiver in their boots remembering the time Red rode Old Pentecost straight into the Olive Branch saloon, turned over all the tables, shot up all the milk bottles and rode bursting through the plate glass window.

Seeliger's description echoes theologian Benedict Groeschel's description of the Holy Spirit as "God in his outrageous mode." It is certainly akin to C. S. Lewis' description of Aslan, the Christ figure in the Narnia series, as being a real lion and while he is good, tame he is most definitely not.

The problem is that all too often we in the church really would prefer to be settlers. We're happy to have the Spirit come as gentle, safe, comforting dove, but are terrified of the promise that the Spirit also can come as mighty wind and tongues of fire that makes timid disciples who were tucked safely away in their well bolted rooms go suddenly rushing off into the middle of Jerusalem boisterously praising God for raising Jesus from the dead. Perhaps we are most afraid because we inherently sense that the timid settlers that the Spirit wants especially to raise from the deadness of their fear and from the poverty of their witness is us! That's because as settlers, we are quite happy to do church in a polite, comforting, tidy, safe, and well controlled way where everyone acts with decency and good order. It may be as dull as warm milk and exciting as watching paint dry, but it's conventional, comfortable and safe, and we like safe!

Unfortunately, I can't find anywhere in scripture where God called his people to play it safe, but everywhere in scripture, the Lord calls his people to be faithful. He calls us to the daring, risky and joy-producing adventure of letting God be God, of trusting in the Lord's wild graciousness and of surrendering to his unpredictable call to our safety-loving hearts.

Consider the story from Joshua chapter 3. That is a story about pioneers ready to trust in the promise of God. For years, I read that story of the priests with the ark of the covenant upon their shoulders moving towards the raging, flood-swollen waters of the Jordan with nothing more than God's promise and faithfulness as their assurance that their feet weren't going to get wet. And I would think, good for them – you'll find me well back from the water's edge, hidden in the watching crowd. And if the waters roll back as God said they would, and if the riverbed looks adequately dry, and if enough people pass over without being swept away in a returning deluge, and if it looks safe enough, unthreatening enough, undemanding enough, then maybe, just maybe, I might try dashing across in due time. Like any good, low-risk settler. Though I might also bring my own life-preserver along, just in case.

That's how I used to respond when I read the story of the crossing of the Jordan. Not any more. I think I've tasted too much of the Spirit and found the Spirit's power so compelling, and Christ's presence so good. Now, when I read the story, I find myself wanting to be at the head of the parade, saying, Lord, just say the word to advance. I'm ready to plunge right in, foot deep, ankle deep, knee deep, waist deep, head deep into the flood, unafraid, in your power, by your promise, with your presence.

Mike Yaconelli, in a marvelous book called *Dangerous Wonder*, said the problem of the modern church is that it is filled "with domesticated grownups who would rather settle for safe, predictable answers instead of wild, unpredictable mystery. Faith

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has been reduced to a comfortable system of beliefs *about* God instead of an *uncomfortable* encounter *with* God." Yaconelli quotes Robert Capon who says that we are *in a war between dullness and astonishment. We have lost our astonishment. The Good News is no longer good news, it is okay news. Christianity is no longer life changing, it is life enhancing. Jesus doesn't change people into wild-eyed radicals anymore. He changes them into "nice people."* Yaconelli asks: "Whatever happened to the kind of Christians who were filled with passion and gratitude, and who every day were unable to get over the grace of God?" He then asserts: "I'm ready for a Christianity that "ruins" my life, that captures my heart, and ... fills me with [such] astonishment so that I am considered wild and unpredictable and dangerous ... to a dull and boring religion." Friends, isn't that a prayer worth praying? Lord, ruin me, so that I'm impatient for anything other than you.

Terry Wardle, the key speaker in the Pastors of Excellence program at Ashland Seminary in Ohio and one of the most godly, biblically rooted and passionate for Christ professors I've ever had the privilege of sitting under, asks the question whether we, as modern day Christians, no longer allow ourselves to become utterly and totally possessed by Christ in the way of the early church? If we read the book of Acts, we see that the apostles "preached Christ, taught Christ, suffered persecution for Christ, travelled the world for Christ, cast out evil spirits by Christ and worked miracles because of Christ. They ate Christ, slept Christ, every day lived Christ. They were fools for Christ to the point of giving up their lives for Christ and dying for Christ."

Terry comments that he simply loves to be around men and women who, like the apostles, are truly possessed by Christ, for they are utterly irresistible and contagious. You want to hang around them and let their joy and passion for Jesus rub off on you, and you can't help but want to become like them.

But here's the problem. Being possessed, he writes, is not something you can do on your own. Many have tried, but no one has ever pulled it off. Trying to do that on our own is, he says, not a pretty sight – sort of like a bad Elvis impersonator. There may be shades of similarity, but not the real thing. To be utterly ruined and captivated by Jesus, to be truly possessed by his power and filled with the presence of his grace is not something we can achieve through our own will power, won't power or wish power. To be people who are filled with passion and gratitude and every day cannot get over the grace of God, to be people who are utterly Christ-possessed and whose lives evidence the wild, uncontrollable, sold-out-for-the-kingdom pioneer-passion that makes the watching world sit up and wonder, can only happen through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Which brings me to the passage from Acts. If later on in chapter ten we will read of people coming to life through the ministry of the apostles, here in chapter five it's a matter of people quite literally dropping dead. Clearly the New Testament church was far more than just a "happenin' place" with cripples dancing and people being healed from disease and sin and selfishness – it was a place where trying to fake religion could have fatal consequences.

Let me make a very strong assertion here – the story about Ananias and Sapphira, though it seems to have a lot to do with money and how we can be all too enslaved by it, is not primarily about our finances. I suspect all too many stewardship sermons have been launched from this scripture in vain attempt to guilt people into giving more and stop holding back on their tithes. Holding back on tithes is definitely not a good thing. In Malachi we read the promise that if his people stopped withholding their gifts but gave with free and loving hearts, God would throw open the storehouses of heaven and rain down so much blessing that it could not be contained. In a day when so many folk and so many churches are increasingly paralyzed by

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fear over finances, wouldn't it be wonderful to see the storehouses of heaven flung wide and the blessings flow down? If the Spirit is God in his outrageous mode, then surely it is sign of the Spirit's presence when God's people throw fear and worldly caution to the wind and give outrageously not only in trust of God's promises but from sheer delight in God's worthiness. But let me say again: the story in Acts is not ultimately about money or the withholding of money.

It's about withholding ourselves. Ananias and Sapphira were free to give as much or keep as much of their wealth as they wanted. The trouble was their trying to fake what they were giving and lying to God about how much they really trusted the Lord's promises and goodness to be sufficient for them. It was the wanting to pretend a pioneer-like devotion and commitment while in fact living a settler-like resistance to and fear of the wild unpredictability of the Spirit's leading. Their sin was indeed that of hypocrisy and lying, but their underlying problem was their unwillingness to believe that the God who raised Jesus from the dead was big enough and good enough, faithful enough and sufficiently and intimately interested enough in them to look after and care for them completely. They trusted more in the life preserver of their retained savings than in the power and goodness of the living Lord.

I would dare suggest that if the church seems all too impotent in its impact on society today, and if church often seems all too dull and boring even for us who show up regularly, it might just be because we have for too long been trying to fake the real thing. Oh, we may sing praises with apparent gusto, pray fervently, have intelligent Bible studies and so on, but if all that activity flows only from our own energies and drive, it may look impressive on the surface, but sadly, it will be nothing more. Remember Paul's great words in I Corinthians 13, that if he were able to speak in the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, he would be only a noisy gong or clanging

symbol. Substitute, or should I say, translate, Holy Spirit for love, and you have the reality. Unless it is the Spirit of Jesus Christ that is at work in us in our worship and study, in our fellowship and service, we are no different than any other human organization. And isn't that both tragic and pathetic? Again, to the Corinthian church, Paul talked about coming not with human wisdom and ability, but in weakness and fear, with nothing other than a demonstration of the Spirit's power. Friends, what makes the difference between a church of settlers – a church that has settled for nothing more than just going through religious motions and faking the real power, glory and joy of the Kingdom – the difference between that and a church of decidedly un-tame pioneers, a church of disciples passionately in love with Jesus, a church where the tangible power and promise of the kingdom of God is being released and where the lame dance and the lost get found, where the broken get healed and the despairing find joy – the difference between a settler church and a pioneer church has everything to do with whether the Holy Spirit is welcomed or resisted, whether the Spirit is called upon and asked again and again to pour out more, or whether God's people go running at the first sign that the Spirit in his unpredictability and power, like Wild Red astride Old Pentecost, might be riding into town.

We, the church, are called to be like Jesus. We are called to be anointed men and women preaching and living good news to a frightened and despairing world. We are called to be healers in Jesus' name and by his power that bind up the heartbroken with the power of heaven's mercy and bring release those who are in bondage. That is Kingdom work. It's Holy Spirit work. It's Holy Spirit at work in us that enables a church to be the real deal, a place where souls are saved and sinners find themselves saturated with grace, where the crippling powers of guilt and shame are overcome and banished, where forgiveness and mercy are poured out in scandalous abundance and

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heaven's awesome love is lavished out to all and any and most profoundly to those who least deserve and least expect it. The church is to be that place where Christ is so present, so adored, so celebrated, that anyone coming within this place knows immediately they are standing on holy ground, and that they are among a people who truly are a Christ-possessed people. And all because of the ministry of the Holy Spirit restlessly, powerfully, extravagantly, moving in and through a people who keep saying and praying and longing for more. Come, Spirit! Come! More! We want more of you. We want you to have your way in and with us that we might become more like you and more for you and for Christ's kingdom. More, Holy Spirit, of boldness and power, of faith and joy, of hope and daring, to live and serve and do whatever you ask for Jesus' glory. Will you pray it with me? More, Holy Spirit! Come Holy Spirit! Pour into us your power and pour us out into the world for your purpose. More! Amen.