

The End

“You are the sign.”

Acts 2:14-21

First in the series: Blown Away (The Holy Spirit and the way things ought to be)

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Fans

I was at the Tiger's game with a couple of friends on a near-perfect night for baseball: it was 2006, no rain, temperatures in the low '70's, a well-behaved crowd watching a game that was filled with quite a few hits, a couple of popular, young pitchers doing battle against the dastardly Yankees. But New York took an early lead it held through the top of the 9th.

We were beginning to wish that the young man sitting in front of us had cut himself off after his second beer. He was beginning to bawl out the right fielder for his conservative fielding; the crowd began raising cheers that were not so much in support of the Tigers as they were derisive of New York. The Yankee fans mingled among us seemed controlled and tried to keep their cool; fans behind us started shouting at vendors for blocking their view of the play.

And then it happened. The Tigers were up in the bottom of the 9th, down 6-5. Pudge Rodriguez walked. A single, one out, another hit; and one run was in to tie it. Another hit, which scored the winning run and the crowd went wild.

One voice, one cheer: everyone was on their feet, strangers-no-more. We even high-fived the man who'd had one-too-many. Joy had bound us together.

Engulfed and Called

Bound together by joy. A ball game might serve as a metaphor, but it is far less than what happened to Jesus' friends.

Cast into despair by Jesus' death, brought to wonder by his resurrection, perplexed by his ascension: this odd collection of tax-gathers, Pharisees, Zealots and fishermen had found a home with each other. They stayed together and waited did for over a week after they stopped seeing Jesus when it happened. The room shook with the percussion of thunder, they were hit by flashes of light; and they poured into the street beside themselves, speaking different, known languages.

Dancing with joy, they made a scene.

Pilgrims and residents of Jerusalem gathered and wondered. Others accused the Jesus' people of having one-too-many, themselves.

Peter was no longer timid. Suddenly clear and measured and to-the-point, he named exactly what was going on. He remembered the words of the prophet Joel: "In the last days there will be a pouring out of the Holy Spirit on all flesh: common people of every age."

Then he preached it: "Jesus came to us bringing God's kingdom, and now what you are seeing is its fulfillment." The Bible goes on to tell about how people responded again and again to the witness of Peter and this new-born church and how signs and wonders were performed: people coming to faith and calling on God like they never had before; miracles and healing and events that defy expectation.

More than any of these signs, there is something clearly different about what this church was like. They were constantly together doing four things that belonged to their character.

First, they were at prayer, constantly praising God and in relationship with God together.

Second, they were bonded together in a unique fellowship, voluntarily sharing all their goods together – actually living out an Old Testament principle called Jubilee that may never before had actually been tried. No person had a need or a debt that wasn't shared and addressed by all.

Third, they broke bread together – not only in communion, which emerged from the heart of this, but they just started getting together over pot-lucks and feasts.

Finally, they were defined by the teaching of the Apostles. When they got together their faith found understanding.¹ When it comes down to it, for all the miracles and good that broke out around them, the very nature of community God's Spirit made them to be: ***they were the wonder, they were the sign.***

With a crack of a ball hit to the left field corner and the score of a run a collection of people who don't even know each other can become a group of best friends. Just like that.

Funny how these things work.

You can point to churches that disappoint, always live in conflict, do harm, even corrupt the meaning of faith and wonder why they even bother. Many people don't. Increasing numbers in Europe and North America have made that conclusion. One study in our country found that over 77% of people say they are Christians,² but of that only 50% consider themselves religious and 33% call themselves "spiritual but not religious."³ Rodney Stark, a professor of sociology at the University of Washington and a co-author of *"Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion"* says, "People who believe in God – and they do – who pray – and they do – are not secular, they are just unchurched. They've never been to church and, in many cases, their parents didn't go either."⁴

I wish they knew what they were missing. You aren't same kind of gathering as a Rotary luncheon or a crowd at a Tiger's game. You are a community marked by the life and character of Jesus; you are immersed in his teaching.

Perfect? No; but he's here, just the same.

You are people who love to be together because of a love you get from Jesus.

You love to eat...and whenever you get together for potlucks, picnics, or communion you make it a banquet of the Heavenly King.

You are a people together who come together to prayer, praising God with all you've got and praying even for people you don't even know. Laura's pointed out to me that being a praying church is part of your reputation. There's folks all around that come to our members and ask if we'd pray for them. They know. They know you.

You give the world a glimpse of God's Kingdom that everyone's been waiting for.

You are the sign. You are the wonder. Just look at you! The Kingdom has made its appearance right here: and among us there are signs God's will *is* being done on earth as it is in heaven.

Isn't that something worth a high five?

Stars in the Night

A few years ago, on the first night of a retreat, a confirmation class I led split into small groups that walked to their own assigned area in the woods. Each group was supposed to find a special spot in its area, make it "holy ground" and build an altar.

I was with one of the groups in the darkness. We combed through the night finding rocks and fallen limbs and other objects to stack and arrange into the altar. We made some of the treasures we found into symbols and icons to aid in worship.

Searching the woods got harder and harder as the night became darker. I strained to see; until suddenly I noticed little twinkles of light glowing in the soil all around us. Magic! If you want to know the scientific explanation, it was light energy emitted from bacteria working to decompose organic matter; but it shone as if it were the stars in the sky come to earth.

You don't always have to look up to see the stars. There are stars here on earth, as well.

You are stars in the night. You are called to be the sign and wonder.

You are people of the Spirit, the first sign of God's future.

You are church:

stars on the earth...right here.

¹ Robert W. Wall, "Acts", *The Interpreters' Bible Commentary* vol. X. Nashville: TN ©2002. pp 71-72.

² "American Religious Identification Survey," by The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, at: http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_studies/aris.pdf

³ "Religious Identification in the U.S." *Religious Tolerance.org* Web Site. Copyright © 2001 to 2006 by Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance. http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_prac2.htm

⁴ Ibid.