

Humorist Dave Barry writes in his book *THE SHEPHERD, THE ANGEL, AND WALTER THE CHRISTMAS MIRACLE DOG*: Mom's car has red ants in it, and we can't get rid of them. Dad thinks they're living on food we dropped under the seat. They're pretty quiet when the car is cold, but once the heater warms it up you sometimes see them running around. Or we'll be driving somewhere and suddenly you'd feel something on your leg. Or sometimes you get bit. Like, one time we were going to church, and an ant bit Dad on the leg and he drove off the road and knocked over Mr. Farbucci's mailbox. Dad said a really bad word, and me and my brother Stuart laughed, and Mom told Dad he shouldn't use such language like that in front of the kids, especially going to church, and Dad told Mom she should know better than to bring pinecones in a car, and Mom said, "Well, if you don't want pinecones in the car next time YOU can help the children with their Science Fair projects, DEAR," and they didn't talk at all the rest of the way to church." (p. 8-9) Anything like that ever happen on YOUR way to church?!

Pentecost is a strange story. For starters, Luke's list of Pentecost observers gathered in Jerusalem is a strange assemblage: Elamites (yeah, we know all about them, right?!), Cretans and Arabs who are comprised of people from Egypt, Libya, and Rome. This is some gathering of the nations. And what are we to make of the inclusion of the long gone, mostly forgotten Medes? Yeah, we know all about them, too! The Elamites were nearly wiped out by the Assyrians in 640 B.C and were eventually absorbed into the Parthenian Empire (we know them too – WHAT?!) The Median Empire entered into a political alliance with Babylon and was later absorbed into the Achaemenid (HUH?!) Empire by Cyrus II. The Medes had been extinct for over 500 years! Elamites long gone too! What's the point? Luke is saying that the Holy Spirit is for EVERYONE – ALL the nations – and even for those who have gone before us. The Holy Spirit is universal, and poured out upon everyone, living and dead. In this gathering, we are seeing the Holy Spirit descending on Jews from all over the world, even to the ends of the earth – and even buried IN the earth.

Peter's sermon proclaims that God's Spirit will be poured out upon all flesh and EVERYONE who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. Surely the stress is upon all flesh, everybody, that is, all people. Israel is being reassembled but that assemblage goes beyond the bounds of what once was considered to be Israel.

We've got here a kind of preview of Peter's vision in the Cornelius narrative (Acts 10:9-23) in which Luke reiterates the universal, far-reaching scope of God's salvation across all ethnic divides. There Peter is invited to be in the Gentile Cornelius' house – BOTH men had been given a vision leading to the other – and Peter concludes: "I begin to see how true it is that God shows no partiality." Surprise, the 'kingdom of Israel' now has boundaries considerably more expansive than the original scope. Look at all these nations who are now being included.

If Pentecost is the birthday of the church, it's the birth of an organization that exists, not for the sake of itself, but for the sake of the world. Here's a gathering that gets together in order to receive empowerment to scatter. This gift of the Holy Spirit is not for the first 12 who show up, but for all. It even includes people who were long dead. The universal scope of God's salvation in Christ is one of the messages from this rich account of the descent of the Spirit. The Spirit descends, pushing the good news out over every border and boundary. (adapted from Willimon, 28 May 2023, in PULPIT RESOURCE, p. 27-28)

So what does this have to do with us? My next 2 points. First, we need to gather in order to be sent. It is here in our gathering that we learn the ways of Jesus. What He is about, what He values, how He is a gatherer, not a scatterer, a lover, forgiver. One who is compassionate with the wayward and lost and

confused and broken. Jesus is the model we try to follow in what we do and say. But we need to come to church in order to be reminded of this message, because we live in a world that keeps telling us 'you deserve this,' 'It's all about you,' 'take care of number 1,' 'grab all you can with all you got.'

Here at church we learn a completely different way. We are servants, not masters, givers, not takers, our happiness is not in what we have but in what we give. Who we become – mature, giving, caring, loving adults – is more important than where we live, what we drive, or what we wear, or how many wrinkles we have had removed.

A member of a church, who previously had been coming to Mass regularly, stopped going. After a few weeks, the priest decided to visit him. It was a chilly day. The pastor found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire.

Guessing the reason for his pastor's visit, the man welcomed him, led him to a big chair near the fireplace and waited. The pastor made himself comfortable but said nothing. In the grave silence, he contemplated the play of the flames around the burning logs.

After some minutes, the pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone. Then he sat back in his chair, still silent. The host watched all this in quiet fascination.

As the one lone ember's flame diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and 'dead as a doornail.'

Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting.

Just before the pastor was ready to leave, he picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it.

As the pastor reached the door to leave, his host said, "Thank you so much for your visit and especially for the fiery sermon. I shall be back in church on Sunday." (Fred Cantrell, quoting John MacArthur, 'The Lonely Ember,' SERVANTS OF THE CHRIST, June 23, 2017)

Second, we are sent out. We are in here for the sake of out there. We don't come to church to 'get my Jesus,' but to share Him with others. It's easy for us to make church just another commodity that we buy – on our terms of course! We come for the preaching we like to hear, the music that suits our taste, the quick dash out of the parking lot before I get asked to do anything for anyone. That's just another form of American consumerism – and it affects church-goers too. But that's not what we were baptized for. We were baptized to be servants, followers of Christ, ambassadors of His good news of reconciliation and forgiveness and peace.

And this can be done by every one of us – whether we are working, retired, in school, or struggling with health issues or physical and mental challenges. We can make the world a better place, build God's kingdom, one interaction at a time. A story to conclude and illustrate.

Johnny works at a grocery store. One day he went to a training event led by a speaker named Barbara Glanz. She was talking to 3000 frontline workers for a supermarket chain – truck drivers, cashiers, and stockers.

Barbara was speaking on how people can make a difference. She described how every interaction with another person is a chance to create a memory, to bless someone's life. She talked about how important it is to look for those moments. She placed on the walls, as she always does when she speaks, posters with inspiring sayings. She told some stories and then went home, but she left her phone number behind. She invited the people at the conference to give her a call if they wanted to talk more about something she said.

About a month later, Barbara received a call from one of the people at that session, a 19-year-old bagger named Johnny. Johnny proudly informed her that he had Down Syndrome, and then he told her his story.

"Barbara, I liked what you talked about. But I didn't think I could do anything special for our customers. After all, I'm just a bagger." Then he had an idea: he decided that every night when he came home from work, he would find a 'thought for the day' for his next shift. It would be something positive, some reminder of how good it was to be alive, or how much people matter, or how many gifts we are surrounded by. If he couldn't find one, he would make one up.

Every night his dad would help him enter the saying 6 times on a page on the computer; then Johnny would print 50 pages. He would take out a pair of scissors and carefully cut out 300 copies and sign every one.

Johnny put the stack of pages next to him while he worked. Each time he finished bagging someone's groceries, he would put his saying on top of the last bag. Then he would stop what he was doing, look the person straight in the eye, and say, "I've put a great saying in your bag. I hope it helps you have a good day. Thanks for coming here."

A month later, the store manager called Barbara. "Barbara, you won't believe what's happened here. I was making my rounds, and when I got up to the cashiers, the line at Johnny's checkout was 3 times longer than anyone else's. It went all the way down the frozen food aisle."

The manager got on the loudspeaker to get more checkout lines open, but he couldn't get any of the customers to move. They said, "That's ok. We'll wait. We want to be in Johnny's line." One woman came up to him and grabbed his hand, saying, "I used to shop in your store once a week. Now I come in every time I go by – I want to get Johnny's thought for the day." Johnny is doing more than filling bags with groceries; he is filling lives with hope.

Of course, what makes the words on the paper mean so much is who they come from. Words alone can come from a fortune cookie. When people get them from Johnny, they are reminded of the beauty of one person forgetting his own limitations and seeking to make his life a blessing to someone else. Whatever burdens Johnny carries make his gift that much brighter.

Know who the most important person in the store is? Johnny the bagger.

A few months later, the manager called Barbara again to tell her Johnny was transforming the whole store. He told her that when the floral department had a broken flower or unused corsage, they used to throw it away. Now they go out in the aisle, find an elderly woman or a little girl, and pin it on her. The butchers started putting ribbons on the cuts of meat they wrap up for customers. The people who make their shopping carts are trying to make carts with wheels that actually work!

If it can happen in a grocery store, it can happen anywhere.

Who is the most important person in your family, your neighborhood, and your workplace? YOU!

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We can all be Johnny the bagger. What Johnny does isn't slick, complicated, or calculated. He is a person expressing his heart, his love for Christ. We can make that happen wherever we are. And the Holy Spirit has empowered us to do this. Go in peace, glorifying God with your lives! Amen. (story from John Ortberg, WHEN THE GAME IS OVER, IT ALL GOES BACK IN THE BOX, pages not noted)

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