



"IT'S A GROUP THING" - ACTS 2:1-13

By: The Reverend Rev. Kyle Brooks, PhD Candidate, Vanderbilt Divinity School

American culture places a high value on individuality. Our culture celebrates the idea of individual labor, the self-made millionaire, the myth of picking yourself up by the bootstraps.

We celebrate the individual genius, the person who “did it alone,” the people who made a singular impact with unprecedented effects.

The idea of doing it (taps chest) “by myself” is seductive because it means I get all the credit for my success. Me, me, me.

But a sister named Beyoncé Knowles taught me that sometimes, the greatest genius is surrounding yourself with the right team. Sister Beyoncé, aka Queen Bey.

Beyoncé dropped *She went on tour* and folks packed stadiums to watch her sing, dance, and entertain like no one else. They came for her individual performance. But if you look at the notes from her album, you’ll find that 72 writers contributed to the work.

And that doesn’t diminish her work. It shows that great work happens when you have help.

Real genius is knowing you can’t do it all by yourself. You might have your **vision** for what things can be, but it will never reach its full potential without the right **team** to carry it out.

Kelsey McKinney, “Beyoncé’s ‘Lemonade’: How the writing credits reveal her genius,” <http://fusion.net/story/294943/beyonce-lemonade-writers/>, April 25, 2016, accessed March 10, 2017.

Michelangelo had a vision for the Sistine Chapel, but he needed 13 assistants to paint the ceiling.

The Civil Rights Movement wasn't the Martin Luther King, Jr. Show; it was a collaboration of countless people, many whose names and faces we'll never know.

Jesus fed 5,000 folks but he needed somebody else's lunch. Even God said, "Let **us** make humanity in **our** image." **Nobody** does it alone. Greatness happens when good folks get together. **True greatness is a group thing, not a solo effort.**

A great thing is happening in the 2nd chapter of Acts. We are witnessing the birth of a community. It doesn't happen overnight. It's easy enough to get a group of people together.

It's hard work to build a community of people. The people who showed up on the day of Pentecost learned how to show up long before then. They learned how to lean on one other and support each other when things got rough. They had proven to each other that they were in this for the long haul.

In the first chapter of Acts, the writer reminds us that Jesus is leaving the building. His followers are waiting for their marching orders. Now if you've watched your teacher, your mentor, your leader, endure death, burial, and resurrection, it seems reasonable to ask, what next?

I mean, how do you follow that up? How do you replace someone whose life and work are unprecedented? The answer is simple: **you don't.**

The danger in following a leader is when we succumb to the temptation to reproduce what they did. A good leader produces new leaders, not clever imitations. So Jesus, like any good leader, doesn't expect them to reproduce what he already did.

Instead, he promises that they will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to the gospel. He told them not to scatter, but to stay in Jerusalem, the holy city. It takes courage to stay put when Jesus has left the building.

But don't miss this: it's not just **what** Jesus says, but **where** he says it. The text shows us that the followers of Jesus returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. The Jewish people used the Mount of Olives as a cemetery. Part of the reason is that the physical mountain is made of soft chalk stone.

What am I saying? I'm saying the ground was suitable for digging, but not for building. You can't lay a foundation on soft ground. Why would Jesus take them to a burial ground? Maybe because he needed to bury something. In my sanctified imagination, Jesus took his folks to a funeral.

I get this feeling that Jesus was teaching his people how to bury their dependency on a single leader, how to bury their insecurities and pettiness, how to bury large egos and low expectations, how to bury their fears and false idols. I have the sneaking suspicion Jesus was teaching them to release the past they could never repeat in order to make room for the future they could not contain.

Unlike most people, Jesus didn't know how to stay in a grave. He had this peculiar habit of getting up where death laid most people down. And in a field of death, Jesus gave his followers the promise that they would receive power to produce a new life together.

In the meantime, they waited. Waiting doesn't mean just standing around; it also means active anticipation. The followers of Jesus devoted themselves to constant prayer. People who can pray together often know how to stay together. They know how to be quiet enough to hear the voice of God, still enough to detect the movement of God, bold enough to follow the inspiration of God. Nothing tells us that the people who were gathered knew exactly what would happen. But they gathered because they **expected** God to do something.

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were already together. When the Holy Spirit arrived, they were all filled at the same time. Tongues of fire rested on each of them. The text doesn't name names. It doesn't tell us who spoke first, or who spoke the longest.

It doesn't tell us who prayed harder or what they prayed. What I read is that **they were all together**. What I know is that the Holy Spirit's coming out party is in a community.

I came up in the Church of God in Christ, so I know a thing or two about shouting and dancing and speaking in tongues. The problem is when people misread spiritual performance as spiritual presence. Verse 5 tells me that devout Jews from every nation were there. These were people with deep religious feelings, commitments, beliefs.

There is nothing wrong with being religious. The root meaning of religion is literally obligation, reverence, the bonds that hold us together. But it means nothing without the power of the spirit. Religious affiliation does not equal spiritual connection.

We can see the difference in the text. The **devout** Jews from all over the world heard this group of Jesus followers speaking to them **in their own languages**. Jesus didn't gather his followers from elite universities. He gathered them from fishing boats and street corners, from roadsides and temple gates, from the working class and the criminals, from the questionable and the marginalized.

These were not gifted scholars or world-class intellectuals who spoke 5 languages apiece. These were everyday people with unusual faith whom God used to demonstrate the power of a group effort.

Jesus didn't just teach them religion; he taught them relationship. They are not **looking** for attention; their actions **draw** attention.

Some of the religious folks **responded** in astonishment. Others **reacted** with disdain. Some of the folks witnessed the **impact** of the Spirit while others questioned the **appearance** of the Spirit. What happens when the power of the Holy Spirit makes you strange to some people and astonishing to others? I think it means that when you're familiar with God you aren't thrown off when God moves in unfamiliar ways.

It's one thing if one person is doing something unusual. It's easy to dismiss one person as an outlier. But when a **powerful group** of people come together and create a force that is undeniable, you can't dismiss it. You have to deal with it.

I think that's the real miracle in Acts 2:4: the Holy Spirit takes **collective** voices, unites them in **one** purpose, and produces **multiple** effects. The Holy Spirit **divides** the simply religious from the spiritually responsive, **multiplies** the impact of believers, **adds** to the witness of the gospel and **subtracts** the notion that God's work depends on any one person. The Holy Spirit empowers this **group** of people to do something that **Jesus himself** never did.

In Jewish tradition, Pentecost was the feast which occurred fifty days after Passover. The Passover feast celebrated the exodus of the Israelites from the slavery of Egypt. The day of Pentecost celebrated God's gift of the ten commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. But on this day of Pentecost in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit brought the power of the one who commanded light to exist, the one who shaped the foundations of the earth, the one who breathed the breath of life into humankind.

Now you can break tablets, and you break commandments, and you can break a human body, but it's hard to break the Spirit that inhabits the community of God's people. I said the **community** of God's people, not just any **group** of religious people.

See, a group of people might root for the same team, and share some of the same interests. They might be tied to common symbols and common leaders, but they aren't tied to each other. Everybody who claims your **group** ain't really in your **community**.

Kelsey McKinney, "Beyoncé's 'Lemonade': How the writing credits reveal her genius," <http://fusion.net/story/294943/beyonce-lemonade-writers/>, April 25, 2016, accessed March 10, 2017.

A community is a group of people who share mutual concern for one another's welfare. A community is a group of people who say, I am because we are. A community is a group of people who believe that you can go quickly on your own, but we can go further together. A community recognizes that a God thing is a **group thing**, and that if God needed a Jesus 2.0, God would have said so.

Greatness is a group thing. I know Martin Luther King had a dream, but it took a community to march through Selma to the Pettus Bridge. I know Rosa Parks took a seat, but it took a community to stand up and boycott. I know Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, but it took a community of scientists to send him into space.

I know Jesus started a spiritual revolution, but it took a Mary to carry him for 9 months. It took a Joseph to provide for his welfare. It took a community to teach him how to grow from infancy to manhood. Jesus was a movement by himself, but he knew we could be a force when we're together.

So what's the Holy Spirit up to? The Holy Spirit is up to a group thing. The Holy Spirit is up to disrupting our idea of what binds us together and showing us what really holds us close: that our common faith in God is what draws us together in ways that cannot be broken by humankind.

A group thing, in the sight of God, is not just the thing that makes us comfortable. It's not the thing that seems easy to us. It would be easy for us to sit in our familiar territories and simply stay put and never grow. It would be easy for us to find solace in our religious comforts while forgetting the relationship that brought us here.

What is our group thing? What is the Holy Spirit trying to do in the midst of we who are gathered here, who are waiting, and expecting, and anticipating a move of God? I'm not entirely sure...but neither were they. The community in Acts 2 didn't need to know the whole story in order to know there was more to it.

Are you ready for a group thing? Are you ready for the Holy Spirit to take the reins, to lead and guide in ways that will feel unusual, that will look strange, that will seem out of our regular order but right in the order of God? Because I believe when we're ready, the Holy Spirit will come, the Holy Spirit will move, and the community of believers will finally understand what it means to be a part of the group thing of God.