

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
The Day of Pentecost
May 24, 2026
Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Acts 2:1-21

"Our Fantastic Faith"

He was a rather imposing figure of a man, standing six feet, two inches and weighing two hundred and forty pounds, or so. Ervin was a professor at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock Medical School - the head of the Neurology Department and an absolutely brilliant man. I was still new to the ministry. In fact, I was such a rookie that I wasn't just wet behind the ears, I had swimmer's ear! It was the year between my second and third years in seminary, when I served an internship in Little Rock, that I first met Dr. Ervin Powell, (may God rest his soul).

Ervin took pity on this poor kid from Texas who was trying his best to live up to everyone's expectations of a minister - you know, holy, wise, learned, sympathetic, and a tower of strength. Ervin could sense that behind the brave facade of self-confidence and wisdom I had constructed I needed a friend, and he chose to be a friend to me. Shortly after my arrival in Little Rock, Ervin invited me to lunch at the University, cryptically saying, "You can leave "the minister stuff" behind, and just be yourself, with me."

I met Ervin for lunch in the faculty dining room and watched and listened in amazement as he spoke of breakthroughs in neurology and the practice of medicine. As far as intelligence goes, he was light-years ahead of me and I didn't begin to understand the theories he espoused, but he was so animated in his descriptions that my lack of understanding didn't matter. I thoroughly enjoyed Ervin because he had a passion for what he did.

But Ervin's passion for his work was nothing in comparison to his zeal for his faith. Toward the end of our lunch, after I had been inundated with scientific information, I asked Ervin how he reconciled being a scientist with being a Christian. I will never forget his answer, which was a long one.

He paused for a few seconds, drew in a deep breath, and began to speak in a hushed tone: "God chose to come to humankind, not as a politician, king or conqueror, but in the form of a baby born in a borrowed stable. Jesus was one of us. He played like all the other kids of his neighborhood. He went through adolescence and had pimples and flirted with the girls.

He apprenticed as a carpenter at his father's side, and then worked as a carpenter for at least fifteen years. He knew what it was to sweat and work late into the night on a project. He worried about landing his next job so that he could help support Mary and Joseph, and his brothers and sisters. He paid taxes and went to synagogue to worship. He bristled under the tyranny of the Roman Empire and the burden of oppressive religious rituals.

This Jesus was a man like us in every way, except (and this is where Ervin's voice began rising as a rosy color flashed across his face) that this Jesus was also God." "Jesus gathered a group of misfits as his disciples, to prove to us that anyone can be a follower. He challenged the authorities and the status quo by socializing with the sinners and outcasts of society.

Jesus healed people the physicians of the time had given up on. He walked on water, calmed a storm at sea, fed thousands of people with meager provisions, and brought dead people back to life." Now, the decibel level had risen even more and people in the dining room were beginning to glance our way, but Ervin continued.

"In his last week of life on earth, Jesus could have taken the road to power and prominence, but instead he chose the road to Calvary - he elected the way of a savior rather than a soldier. He could have stopped the process of suffering if he had really wanted to, and in fact he contemplated it several times, but he chose to suffer for our sake. Jesus suffered with the shame and humiliation of being spat upon by the same crowds that had shouted hallelujah only five days before. He suffered from the lashing he took. He suffered from the searing pain of the nails plunging into his flesh. He bled and died on the Roman equivalent of an electric chair, and left this life in the same way he entered it, in a borrowed resting place. This Jesus was God!"

Speaking with enthusiasm and animation, Ervin went on: "After everyone had given up hope. While the disciples cowered in the corner of the very room where Jesus had shared the last supper with them, Jesus rose from the grave. He had been dead as a doornail and now he was alive. He burst the bonds of death for our sake to pave the way for us.

He appeared to the eleven disciples and to many others and then ascended into heaven Ten days after that the Holy Spirit came to the disciples who were once again hiding, this time in the upper room. The Spirit roared into their midst sounding like a hurricane and inflaming these timid disciples into apostles who carried Christ' message to the very ends of the earth.

And then, Ervin paused and leaned across the table. "Do you want to know why I am a Christian?" he asked. I nodded in the affirmative, knowing that I was about to be introduced to the core of his faith. What would this scientist with a brilliant mind reveal as the foundation of his faith? What great secret was I about to learn?

I took a deep breath and focused on listening and absorbing what this immensely talented elder of the church would say. Ervin said, "I am a Christian because it is all so fantastic! Everything about Christianity is fantastic! The birth, the life, the death, the resurrection and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is simply fantastic!"

Ervin sat back in his chair and breathed a huge sigh of satisfaction. I sat there for a few minutes in silence, unaware that every conversation in the dining room had stopped and all eyes were on us. It was a moment I will never forget, because in that moment I heard the most persuasive preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ I have ever heard.

Eventually, conversations returned to normal and the clinking and clanking of silverware and glasses drowned out the remainder of our conversation, which I don't even recall. But what I heard that day from my friend, the most brilliant scientific mind I have ever encountered, will be with me forever.

He spoke the truth, you know. Our faith is fantastic. We, who have been Christians for more than just a few years tend to forget how fantastic our faith is. What happened nearly two thousand years ago is phenomenal. It was totally unexpected. And yet, with the passage of time, we have begun to treat it as if it were just another event. Oh, it's just Pentecost....no big deal.

But this day is a big deal! The disciples gathered to celebrate the Jewish Feast of Weeks, a harvest festival, sort of like our Thanksgiving Day, when they were overcome by a power unlike anything they had ever experienced. The disciples may have gathered just to celebrate another ritual, but what God, through the Holy Spirit did was anything but routine.

In a single, swift, symbolic, surprise, God demolished all the barriers humanity had so carefully constructed through the centuries. Differences in language, race, ethnic background, and religion were rendered obsolete by the inclusion of such a variety of folks in the Pentecost experience. Clearly, the power of the Holy Spirit was not to be restricted to a select group of people. Like a stone breaking the still surface of water, the Holy Spirit skipped across the world sending ripples to the furthest shores, and throughout all time.

The miracle of Pentecost is as much about hearing as it is about speaking. It is a miracle of ears as well as tongues. The amazing thing was not just that these uneducated men spoke languages they didn't know, but that their speech meant something to each person in the crowd. This was a two-way miracle which occurred in both the sender and the receiver of the message of Good News.

It had been a decade of days since Jesus' ascension into heaven and they were anxious about their future. The Holy Spirit empowered these mostly illiterate followers to speak

fluently in languages they should not have been able to speak. The Parthians, Medes and Elamites mentioned are nations that were conquered by the Assyrians in 550BC. How could these followers of Jesus know languages, some of which died out centuries before?

With the mysterious cacophony echoing through the alleyways of Jerusalem, a crowd, which resembled a mini–United Nations, gathered and listened with astonishment as each person heard their native language. The disciples' anxiety disappeared as they realized that the Spirit had created conditions where they could speak and be understood. The Holy Spirit had converted adversity into an advantage. As my friend Ervin said so many years ago, “It’s all so fantastic!”

On the day of Pentecost, God was calling us to a level of experience we may have never known before, a level of experience that has been carefully excluded from modern discourse because it is simply too fantastic to talk about. It is fair to say that, at times, we have doubts about this story. Who doesn't? It is so fantastic. It is fair to say that we don't understand Pentecost, that we would like to know more, that we are baffled, surprised, fearful, and even confused about it. It is all so fantastic!

The gospel writers meant for us to know that the first witnesses of Pentecost had exactly the same reaction to the event. It is just so fantastic! But then, so is our God!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen