

Pentecost Sermon May 24, 2015

When Pentecost Day arrived, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound from heaven like the howling of a fierce wind filled the entire house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be individual flames of fire alighting on each one of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak. There were pious Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. When they heard this sound, a crowd gathered. They were mystified because everyone heard them speaking in their native languages. They were surprised and amazed, saying, "Look, aren't all the people who are speaking Galileans, every one of them? How then can each of us hear them speaking in our native language? We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene; Immigrants from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs - and we all hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages! They were all surprised and bewildered. Some asked each other, "What does this mean?" Others jeered at them, saying, "They're full of new wine!" Peter stood with the other eleven apostles. He raised his voice and declared... Judeans and everyone living in Jerusalem! Know this! Listen carefully to my words! These people aren't drunk, as you suspect; after all, it's only nine o'clock in the morning! Rather, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: In the last days, God says, I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young will see visions. Your elders will dream dreams. Even upon My servants, men and women, I will pour out My Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will cause wonders to occur in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and a cloud of smoke. The sun will be changed into darkness, and the moon will be changed into blood, before the great and spectacular day of the Lord comes. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved! Those who accepted Peter's message were baptized. God brought about three thousand people into the community on that day. The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, believers met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.

Acts 2: 1-21, 41-47

Today is Pentecost, a day to put aside our rational, analytical, critical-thinking abilities and enter into the mystery of the Holy Spirit. On Pentecost, as recorded in the book of Acts, the disciples gathered in Jerusalem and received the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, in languages that everyone hearing understood. The coming of the Holy Spirit was a

promise from Jesus to His disciples; that when His earthly ministry was done God would continue to be present with them as the Holy Spirit.

(An explanation here might be helpful. Christians confess a Trinitarian God: one God known in three ways, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. On that first Pentecost the disciples experienced the Trinitarian God. They had known God as Father and Creator. They had known God as Jesus, the Son and Redeemer. And that day they came to know God as the Holy Spirit.) Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as the Comforter, and the Advocate. The Church refers to the Holy Spirit as the Sustainer. That day of Pentecost the disciples experienced God's Holy Spirit as wind and fire and as interpreter of languages spoken and heard. Jesus told His disciples that had John baptized them with water but the Holy Spirit would come and baptize them with fire. That day when people were gathered at the temple to celebrate Pentecost, fifty days after the Passover, the Holy Spirit appeared as fire, as tongues of fire, upon the disciples and they were given the ability to tell the good news of the love and forgiveness offered in Jesus Christ in words that everyone could understand. And that day, the church was born. Pentecost was the "big bang" - the creation - of the church.

Many of us who've grown up in the church, like I have - actually multiple generations of us now - may have lost the awe and wonder this story of Pentecost should awaken in us. Many of us believe that church is supposed to be comfortable and predictable and unchanging. (Of course there's nothing in scripture to support that. It's more a cultural understanding of church that came about, in part, from post-World War II stability and prosperity in America.) If the church is a place that comforts us and soothes us with a sense of security and safety, then the big bang - Wind! Fire! Tongues! Power! - of the Holy Spirit who appeared that first Pentecost has become a muffled sound. A quiet sound. A thud.

Today's reading from Acts was more than the scene at Pentecost because of what followed after the disciples witnessed to the crowds and Peter preached to them. This is (to me) the miraculous part of the Pentecost story: by the power of the Holy Spirit people heard the message of God's redemptive love through Christ Jesus and were drawn into the church. By the power of the Holy Spirit the church became a community of diverse people who worshipped and prayed and ate together "with gladness and simplicity." By the power of the Holy Spirit God worked wonders through them to love and heal. By the power of the Holy Spirit they shared whatever they had with those in need. By the Power of the Holy Spirit they "demonstrated God's goodness to everyone." There is excitement in this story that's more than God's visual effects of wind, fire, and tongues. Through the Holy Spirit God shaped a new people called the church. God is still shaping us and calling us to be the church. But I think we've lost some of the amazement and wonder of the early disciples. That's why I've asked us to set aside our critical-thinking abilities and enter into... that is, experience... the Holy Spirit. I'm convinced that more than ever we need to open ourselves and experience the power of the Holy Spirit. Because we are the church, God's heart-and-life-changing agent, and there are people in the world who need to hear the gospel (that is the good news) of Jesus Christ, and the love and forgiveness He offers.

I have a young friend - I've known him since he was a little boy - who's had a really difficult time growing up. He has anger issues that has gotten the attention of the law, and kept him from serving in the military. He's fathered children with two women. And he struggles to feel good about himself. Sam [that isn't his real name] is like many young adults; he doesn't see a place for himself in the church. The list of what's not inviting about the church to Sam is too long to list but we have two things he desperately needs; two things that I seriously don't think he can do without. Sam needs to know that in Jesus Christ his sins are forgiven. There's a song, a variation of *Amazing Grace*

that I especially like that goes like this: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me... I once was lost but now I’m found... was blind but now I see: Hallelujah! Grace like rain falls down on me. Hallelujah! All my stains are washed away; they’re washed away. Hallelujah! Grace like rain falls down on me. Hallelujah! All my stains are washed away; they’re washed away.” I want for Sam to know that his stains, his sinful stains (that we all have) can be washed away by the grace of Jesus Christ. I think Sam feels his sins (that’s my word; I don’t know that he’d use it) are heavy baggage that he carries with him, and that they identify him. But the good news that was heard on that Pentecost day is the same good news we proclaim and practice: in Christ, our sins are forgiven. Hallelujah! All our stains are washed away.

The other thing Sam needs that we can give him - if we could get him in the door, if we knew the language to reach him – is the knowledge that he is a beloved child of God. In the church we love with the radical love of God. That is, we love even people we aren’t crazy about, people we really wouldn’t be friends with, because we are called to. We have experienced God’s radical heart-and-life-changing love for us and we “use” it on each other. We love. And when we are loved like that we come to know - that is, we experience, so we know it with all of our being - that we are worthy of love. And we come to see ourselves as a valued and integral part of the Body of Christ; and we are able to hold within us and give to others God’s radical, inclusive, welcoming, redeeming love.

Both of those things, forgiveness of sins, and understanding that God loves us and wants a relationship with us, are gifts that the church still has... even after these thousands of years since the big bang of Pentecost... to offer the world. Peter quoted the prophet Joel... that in the last days God’s people would see visions and dream dreams. My dream is that in this church we each learn to speak a language that someone – someone like Sam – hears in *his* language that tells him of the

forgiveness and love of Christ. There isn't one language that all of us speak but we are all capable of learning a language born out of the big bang in our own hearts when we came to know for ourselves that the promises of God are real, and personal. (Even Peter, who publically denied knowing Jesus, became a bold speaker and teacher of the gospel.) My dream is that we will study and learn a language of God's love and grace that someone needs to hear. We sang *Veni, Sanctus, Spiritus*, which is Latin for *Come, Holy Spirit*. I've shared my dream for our church. Let's respond with "*Come, Holy Spirit!*" What's your dream? Let's share our dreams and visions for the church, and then respond with "*Come, Holy Spirit!*"