

May 13, 2018

A Place to Call Home

Title: What's Mine is Yours

Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

Romans 8:22-27

John 15:26-27, 16:7 12-15

I think I will always remember the first Pentecost sermon I preached. It was right here many years ago. Pastor Ruth was away and asked me to preach that Sunday. I would have been willing to preach on almost any Sunday except Pentecost. I didn't know much about Pentecost and quite frankly, I was a little afraid of it.

My only experience with Pentecost had been in college where I was involved with a group of students who were really focused on the whole idea of speaking in tongues which finds its initial expression here in the Pentecost story. We just heard that "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

The group with whom I was involved in college placed a very high emphasis on the whole idea of "speaking in tongues" and the implication was that if you hadn't received the Holy Spirit and didn't speak in tongues, then you were not a real Christian. It took many years for me to learn more and to find myself in a very different place and with different understanding.

While it is true that our account of this amazing day in the history of the church tells us that the Holy Spirit came upon those gathered and they spoke in languages they did not previously know, this was not for their edification, or their benefit. It was for God's.

Pentecost or the Feast of Weeks was one of three annual pilgrimages when all faithful Jewish males were required to travel to Jerusalem. This

festival was observed at the beginning of the wheat harvest, and they were to bring with them a portion of the first part of the harvest as a thank offering to God.

It might also be important to note that in their harvest they were careful not to harvest to the edges of the field. They left the corners of the field untouched, and any grain missed in the initial pass through the field was not subsequently picked up. The grain that had been missed and the grain in the corners of the field were left as a way of providing for the poor and any strangers who needed food. Think about that for a second. The tradition and mandate to provide food for the poor and the stranger is as old as the first laws in the Old Testament and yet it is still a subject of debate today.

Jews from all around the Mediterranean had come to Jerusalem. We just heard a rather lengthy list of the places from which they came. They spoke a variety of languages. On this day, incredibly each of them heard the disciples speaking in their own language. This was far more than a miracle of speaking in other languages, it was a miracle of hearing – of hearing in their own language.

Some were confused and thought that the disciples were drunk. But then Peter stood up and spoke – and all that were gathered continued to understand what he was saying. Even though they spoke many different languages, they were all able to hear and understand what Peter said.

The Bible contains a story way back in Genesis 11, that says, “At one time, the whole Earth spoke the same language... (The people) said to one another, ‘Come, let’s build ourselves a city and a tower that reaches Heaven. Let’s make ourselves famous so we won’t be scattered here and there across the Earth.’” According to the story, “God took one look and

said, 'One people, one language; why this is only a first step. No telling what they'll come up with next – they'll stop at nothing! Come, we'll go down and garble their speech, so they won't understand each other.' Then God scattered them from there all over the world. ... That's how it came to be called Babel, because there God turned their language into 'babble'. From there God scattered them all over the world."ⁱ

The miracle of hearing at Pentecost, was a powerful demonstration of the reversal of the experience of the Town of Babel. Where once, we hear that God had confused their languages so that they could not plot together and think that they were better and stronger than God; on this day, they came together and each could hear in his or her own language. A miracle of hearing.

A miracle of hearing brought by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit so that Peter and the other disciples could share in a very powerful way what had happened. In the verses that follow what we heard today, Peter went on to tell them about Jesus – about his life, his death, and his resurrection. Peter then told them “‘Change your life. Turn to God and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins are forgiven. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’ He went on in this vein for a long time, urging them over and over.... That day about three thousand took him at his word, were baptized and signed up. They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers.”ⁱⁱ

Think about it for a minute. Peter and the other disciples had hidden behind locked doors after Jesus' death because they were afraid. The night that Jesus was arrested, Peter had been so afraid that he had denied three times that he even knew who Jesus was. They had been astounded

that Jesus was alive, and was telling them that they were going to go and preach to a hostile world. Then Jesus had told them to go back to Jerusalem and stay there until they received power from on high.

Now, on this amazing day – they had received that power. They had received the Holy Spirit in a dramatic way that sounded like the rush of a violent wind, filling the entire house. “Then divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.” Now, Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd. He spoke boldly, honestly and by the time he was finished, about 3,000 people had come to believe, and had made a commitment to follow the way of Jesus.

The gift of the Holy Spirit empowered and equipped the disciples for ministry and for witness. We celebrate Pentecost because this same Spirit is with us today. This same Spirit is our companion, our helper, our guide, our comfort. This same Spirit empowers and equips each of us for ministry and for witness.

Michaela Bruzzese wrote an article entitled “Full Circle”ⁱⁱⁱ in which she observes that “Luke’s vibrant description gives us a critical template on which we base our own churches.” She notes three important things. First, the followers were all gathered together. This is why it is important for us to be a gathered fellowship, a congregation, a community. The Spirit most often reveals itself in community.

Secondly, and I had never noticed this before, Luke writes that “a tongue rested on each of them”. Each person, without exception, received no more and no less than the others. We are all equally blessed with the gifts and the responsibilities of the Spirit. I have said it before, and

undoubtedly will say it again: Our particular gifts may vary, but each and every one of us is blessed with the gifts that God can and will use if we are willing to respond.

Thirdly, the Spirit immediately enabled them to speak “in the native language” of all who heard them. The Spirit can and does surpass all barriers of communication, whether they are self-imposed or other-imposed.

Shane Claiborne, a young Christian activist and author, notes that at Pentecost, “A really diverse group of people understood each other as the Spirit of God fell upon them. It was a divine moment of reconciliation among people from many different tribes, nations, and languages, a reconciliation moment that the world desperately needs today.”^{iv}

Sadly, it is true that today, both here in our country and around the world, we are divided by so many things that it seems to be increasingly difficult for us to even talk with each other about the things we feel passionate about. We find ourselves talking **AT** each other, not **With** each other. Too often we talk **without** creating the time or space to really listen to the other person. We may be speaking the same language, but we are not hearing each other.

But at Pentecost, each person heard what was being said. Before the coming of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were a huddled-up band of betrayers and deniers. With the Spirit they go into all the world, baptizing, preaching, teaching, and witnessing to the Good News. Without the Spirit we are a divided people, each looking out for ourselves. With the Spirit we are one body, young men and old women dreaming dreams together. The Spirit is world-creating, renewing, restoring, making all things new.

We may not experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in the same way that the disciples did on that day. But the Holy Spirit is still present with each of us, eager to be part of our lives, eager to be our guide, our helper along our faith journey.

At Pentecost, God reunited a scattered people into a new beloved community unlike the human made tower they tried to build at Babel. The new beloved community would be centered around the Spirit of God. I believe that this is still God's vision and desire.

Claiborne points out that this new community, this new sign of God's Spirit is a "community that is as diverse as creation itself, as unique as the fingerprints we leave and the DNA we're made of. But it's a community that understands each other amid our diversity, each as children of God." As children of God we are most definitely not all the same. But our uniformity as children of God is not because we are the same, but it is because in our diversity, each and every one of us is a child of God, and together we are the family of God.

We can be diverse but still of "one heart and mind" through the Spirit of God. Unity does not mean uniformity. To harmonize does not mean we homogenize. In fact when we listen to music, any truly good harmony has lots of different voices, just like the early church, just like the diverse crowd gathered on that day of Pentecost.^v

A Pentecost vision invites us not to settle for the world as it is, but to dream of the world as it could be – and as it should be.

This Thursday marks the anniversary of the way John Wesley, who is considered the founder of Methodism, experienced his own Pentecost or presence of the Holy Spirit. On May 24th 1738, John Wesley went reluctantly to a group meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. At that

meeting he heard a reading from Martin Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. He wrote in his journal that at about 8:45 pm. "while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine."

For Wesley, it wasn't the sound of a violent wind. It wasn't tongues of fire. There was no speaking in tongues or foreign language. There was simply a feeling of his heart being "strangely warmed". This experience was for Wesley as profound and life changing as the more dramatic Pentecost experience had been for the disciples.

No matter what our experience has been, the Holy Spirit is present with each of us. In Paul's letter to the church in Rome, he describes the effects of this Holy Spirit. "The Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." The gift of the Holy Spirit equipped the disciples for ministry and witness and continues to equip each of us today.

Maren Tirabassi writes some beautiful prayers and worship resources. This week, my Face book page reminded me of a post I shared 5 years ago that included one of her poems called "Speaking in tongues." She spends several stanzas talking about how different people experience the presence of the Holy Spirit, from an old preacher, to a blues singer, a fisherman from Gloucester, a power company lineman from icy Aroostook County, and a homeless man on the street among others. She concludes with these words, "Pentecost isn't so much about speaking foreign words as trusting a voice you don't understand, maybe even your own voice, and listening to the crazy vocal orchestration ... of the Holy Spirit."

When and how have you experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit? When and how has the Holy Spirit empowered you to do something you didn't think you could do? When has the Holy Spirit given you a nudge or an encouragement to try something new, something you hadn't thought about.

As I look around, I see the Holy Spirit working in many ways within this congregation. I see the Holy Spirit prompting the gathering of school supplies for children in Liberia. I see the Holy Spirit sustaining a youth group project to sponsor Godwin, a young man in Ghana for many years. I see the Holy Spirit acting in the lives of individuals who are called to volunteer at the Food Pantry, or a health clinic, or serve on the board of our Elder Care Facility, or our camp. I see the Holy Spirit leading us to sing Christmas Carols to residents of the Elder Care Facility. I see the Holy Spirit calling people to teach Sunday School, to provide hospitality, to march for justice, to speak truth to power. The Holy Spirit is acting in each of our lives and in the lives of this congregation – all we have to do is be open to that working.

The Holy Spirit empowered the disciples and continues to empower each of us today.

Faithful Jews had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, when the angel of death passed over their homes while they were slaves in Egypt. During Passover, Jesus became the Passover lamb crucified. Three days later Jesus rose from the grave and spent 40 days teaching his disciples before ascending to heaven. 50 days after his resurrection, the Holy Spirit came as he had promised and empowered them for ministry. The promised Holy Spirit arrived on the Day of Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks. The first fruits of the church were gathered by Christ as about

3,000 people heard Peter empowered by the Holy Spirit present the Gospel. The first fruits of God's Spiritual harvest under the New Covenant began as faithful Jews brought the first fruits of the wheat harvest to God. Today that harvest continues as people continue to hear the good news, as people continue to commit their lives to following Jesus, as people continue to be open to the leading and empowering of the Holy Spirit in their lives, as people continue to trust a voice that they may not initially understand as the Holy Spirit calls us, guides us, comforts us, empowers us, intercedes for us and leads us where God is calling us to be and to go.

Let us commit ourselves to being open to hear the Holy Spirit in our lives, whether that is through a violent wind, tongues of fire, a heart strangely warmed, a piece of music, a sermon, the word of a friend or the word of someone speaking the truth we need to hear, a piece of art, the smile of a child. Jesus spoke to his disciples telling them stories about common ordinary things so that they could understand. God continues to speak in our lives through the Holy Spirit often through the most common things, so that we may understand and respond. Let us commit to being open to the Holy Spirit in whatever way the Spirit may come to us.

ⁱ [Genesis 11 The Message](#)

ⁱⁱ [Acts 2 The Message](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ "Preaching the Word" Sojourners

^{iv} "Why I Love Fire, Pentecost and the Beloved Community" Shane Claiborne, in "Preaching the Word"

^v Ibid