

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
June 9, 2019 – Pentecost
Title: Empowered– By A Loving God
Scripture: Acts 2:1-21
John 14:8-17

Pentecost is one of those often-confusing days within the church calendar. It has become a day that we call the birthday of the church, but it is also much more than that. It has been used by some as a measuring stick to decide who is a “real Christian”. When I was in college, one group of Christians either insisted or implied, that you were not a “real Christian” if you hadn’t “received the Holy Spirit and spoken in tongues” as they did on the day of Pentecost. For several years, I struggled with this idea and thought that my faith was lacking or somehow incomplete because I had never had that experience. But the experience of “speaking in tongues” is NOT a criterion for the validity of our faith.

So what is Pentecost and why is it important in the life of the church?

Pentecost was actually a Jewish festival, also known as the Feast of Weeks. It was celebrated 50 days after Passover, and it was the beginning of the Wheat Harvest. It was one of three “Pilgrimage feasts”; times when all faithful Jewish males were supposed to travel to Jerusalem and to bring with them the first fruits of the wheat harvest. This explains why there were people from so many different countries and areas present in Jerusalem at this time; people who spoke a variety of different languages.

Last week, as we celebrated Ascension, you may remember that as Jesus left them, he told them to return to Jerusalem until they “were clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49b NRSV) That’s what happened on

the day of Pentecost; they were “clothed with power from on high” and the church as we know it today was birthed.

Remember that the people gathered in the room that day were the same people who, after Jesus’ death, had hidden in a room with the doors locked because they were afraid for their lives. After spending forty days with Jesus and getting a final crash course on how to be disciples without his physical presence, they had returned to Jerusalem and instead of hiding, they spent time in the temple praising God. (Luke 24:52-3)

We heard the description of what happened that day when suddenly the house where the disciples and Jesus’ followers were gathered was filled with a sound like the rush of a violent wind. “Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.” Luke uses images and descriptions that are found in Hebrew Scripture to describe how God reveals God’s self. Remember that Moses saw a bush that was burning, but not being consumed by the fire. One of the commentators I read this week drew attention to the idea that the sound and wind didn’t fill just part of the house, but all of the house. Since this is the revelation of God pouring out love and power on God’s people, it means that “love fills the entirety of the house.”ⁱ

The tongues that rested on them, rested on each person. This same commentator reminds us that, “The gift of the Spirit was not give as one blazing flame handing over the whole community. Each person in the community experienced a ‘tongue’ of flame. In contrast to the chaotic nature of the sound (of the wind), here the tongue is “resting” as though it were claiming each person in the community.”ⁱⁱ

“All of the were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” (Acts 2:4 NRSV)

This is a powerful image, but all of this takes place in only three short verses. The rest of the passage reminds us to keep moving forward. It's about mission and about being empowered and transformed by a God who loves us.

Because it was Pentecost, there were Jews from every nation in Jerusalem and they were amazed when they heard people speaking in their own native languages. Their initial response is amazement, not only that each of them was hearing his own language but also that those who were speaking were Galileans – Men from Galilee.

This is not unlike the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when one of his first disciples, Philip went to his friend Nathanael to tell him about Jesus. (John 1:46) Nathanael's response was, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Now people in Jerusalem are asking, "Aren't these all Galileans?" The implication being that these are not scholars, they are ordinary men who wouldn't have known how to speak their languages.

The speaking, the understanding is coming from and to ordinary people, an unexpected place for a great revelation from God to come. But true to the way God seems to work in the Bible and especially in Jesus' life and beyond, it is the ordinary person and often the most unlikely who is used by God to spread God's word and God's love.

The great crowd of people gathered from all around are each understanding what is being said. They are included – not excluded. And then Peter stood and raised his voice and addressed them. "The gift of the Spirit does not discriminate."ⁱⁱⁱ Everyone is included.

Peter addressed the entire crowd – the group of people who spoke many different languages. Peter, who had not long ago, denied three times that he even knew who Jesus was, now stands in front of a large

crowd to tell them about Jesus. First, he recalls words from the prophet Joel – words that include all persons being part of the way God would reverse the normal divisions of life. “Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams.... Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”

All people are included – young men, old men, women, children, slaves and free. All orders of society are included in God’s plan for the world. “The innocence of children, the energy of youth, the cynicism of middle age, the experience that comes from old age”^{iv} all are part of God’s plan; all are included; all have something to contribute; all are needed.

The passage continues beyond what we heard this morning, as Peter, empowered by the Holy Spirit tells about Jesus life, death, and resurrection. Luke tells us that the crowd heard the message, welcomed the message and were baptized. We read that about three thousand people were added that day and that they devoted themselves to the teaching and fellowship and to the breaking of bread and prayer. “And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” (Acts 2:47b)

One commentator summed it up this way, “On the day of Pentecost, God’s Spirit was shared in a way that led to those outside the community understanding God in a new way, but also in the specific, contextual languages with which they were most familiar. The power of the clarity given to those who were gathered together was spread among the all, rather than imparted to a select few to enhance their community at the expense of those who had not experienced the love of God.”^v

In times when people seem eager to define who is on the inside and who is on the outside, it is good for us to remember Pentecost. The Book of Acts was likely written about two generations after these events, and so they particularly remind us that the Christian mission is one that is to go out in ever-widening circles. It reminds us that as in the story of the Ascension, Luke has Jesus telling his disciples to go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth, so now, here with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, that is exactly what is happening.

“Fifty years after Christ’s resurrection the good news is being proclaimed in numerous languages, worship is adapting to different cultures in distant regions.” As Martin L. Smith wrote, “The church summoned into life by the Spirit is not monolingual or monocultural, but intrinsically diverse.”^{vi}

It is important for us to remember that God speaks many languages – God speaks all languages. In the 11th chapter of Genesis there is a story to describe the origin of the world’s cultures. The people decided to build a very tall tower. In the story, God decides to mix up their languages and the people then spread throughout the earth.

In the story of Pentecost, God brings the many languages together through the power of the Holy Spirit, reminding us that God created all people, all cultures, all languages. Here God brings them together and speaks to them in their own languages. It is a reminder that our faith does not belong to us alone. It is a reminder that if we try to be only a local church – a church only for one community, one culture, then we miss out on what God is doing in our world. I think it is a reminder that when we become too comfortable with who we are, then we become less than God wants us to be, less than we can be with the power of the Holy Spirit.

The greatest miracle of Pentecost, I think, is not that the disciples spoke in languages other than their own. It is not only that people heard the disciples speaking in their own languages. I think the greatest miracle of Pentecost is the change that took place in the lives of the disciples.

The same people who had traveled with and learned from Jesus, who grieved his death, who hid in a locked room, who were shocked by Jesus' resurrection, and who had waited for the Holy Spirit that Jesus told them to expect, were transformed in ways that can be described as nothing but miraculous. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they had courage that they had never known. They told people about Jesus, even when it meant that they faced danger themselves and found themselves in prison. They confronted the power of the Temple authorities and of the Roman authorities.

Even more than this, the Holy Spirit brought the community together in such a way that their lives were a witness to others. On Pentecost, about 3,000 people were added to their community. When the Festival of Weeks was over, many of them returned to the places where they lived and they began to share what had happened. The early church devoted themselves to praying together, to breaking bread together, to worshipping together and to taking care of the needs of each other.

Luke, in this account, tells us that "Every day, they 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: 46-47 CEB)

Now, about 2,000 years later, we, in the modern church, and in our local congregation are challenged to compare ourselves to that passionate

early body of believers. Are we people who devote ourselves to prayer, or has prayer become just a ritual, something we do at prescribed times and in prescribed ways. Do we pray daily for our church to be faithful to what God is calling us to be and to do?

Are we people who remember and celebrate that God's world is a diverse world, that the Holy Spirit was intentional about including all people? Do we celebrate the differences among us and around us in languages and cultures? Are we able to remember that God speaks in all languages?

Can we remember that at Pentecost, the tongues of fire rested on each person? The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was both to a community, and to individuals within the community. Each person, each one of us, has been touched by the Holy Spirit and each of us has been empowered by a loving God to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ in a world that continues to change rapidly. We are Pentecost people; people called by God, empowered by God, and sent by God to be witnesses to a world that needs to know about God. We are Pentecost people; called by God to be a community that together devotes ourselves to prayer, to worship, to fellowship, to mission, to witness, to being the church of Jesus Christ in our world.

ⁱ GBOD, Preaching notes for "Empowered by a loving God."

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Berry, Malinda Elizabeth. "Intimate Connections" in Preaching the Word in Sojourners Website.

^v GBOD

^{vi} Smith, Martin L. "In Other Languages" in Preaching the Word in Sojourners website.