

“Spirit Talk”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 23, 2021

Pentecost Sunday

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Acts 2:1-21

“What does this mean?” That is the question the people in Jerusalem ask when they see the power of the Holy Spirit descending on Pentecost, when these Galilean followers of Jesus are able to speak in a multitude of languages so that everyone who is present that day – Jews from all over the ancient world – are able to understand the words being spoken to them.

What does this mean? What is the significance of this? What’s really going on? Some of the witnesses within the Pentecost crowd are concerned that things have gotten a little too wild. The Celtic Christians had a name for the Holy Spirit, *Wild Goose*, which hints at the mysterious nature of the Spirit. Much like a wild goose, the Spirit of God cannot be tracked or tamed.¹

There is an element of danger and an air of unpredictability that surrounds the coming of the Holy Spirit. While it may sound a little sacrilegious, there may be no better description of what it’s like to follow God’s Spirit leading us through life than a wild goose chase. Maybe the Celtic Christians were on to something that much of institutionalized Christianity has missed out on. Maybe we have clipped the wings of the wild goose and settled for something less than what God originally intended for us.

How do most of us make sense of unexpected and out-of-the-ordinary events? We are alternately amazed, puzzle over it, dismiss it, or maybe even try to find an explanation that fits within our realm of reasoning and possibility. “They are filled with new wine,” some of the witness that day said. For them, drunk disciples made more logical sense than a miracle of God. What happened on Pentecost certainly defied the norms of understanding.

Luke – who authored the book of Acts – knows that the Holy Spirit is all about dynamic freedom. The metaphors he employs in Acts for the Spirit – tongues, fire, and wind – all signify the radical nature of the Spirit’s freedom. We translate the Greek word *dynamis* as “power;” an image suggestive of what

¹ Nathan Williams, “A Funny Thing”

happens when fire strikes dynamite. And so, the ways that the Spirit interacts with people – coming upon, filling up, giving the power to speak in different languages – amplify the Spirit’s action.²

The real miracle here rests not with the words the disciples speak but in the ability of the crowd to understand. They are able to hear the gospel in their own various languages. This is what we all desire: that the Spirit would communicate with every person in a language particular to that individual. But we also know that – like the wild goose we chase – once the word is out, it is set free.

I have studied – with varying degrees of success – four different foreign languages. In elementary, middle and high school, I was exposed to Spanish and French: two beautiful, living languages. Then, in seminary, I was required to study ancient Hebrew and Greek; with the hope that these so-called “dead languages” would come alive to better understand and interpret the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

Some people set out to learn a language out of determination born of necessity. Though, as my wife – a high school French teacher – will attest, most who enter into fluency in a foreign language do so because at some point they learn to love it. It sounds beautiful to them. And if that love is complete, they come to love the people – the food and practices, the songs and poetry – and they love the place on earth that those people call their land, their home.³

This love for a language is something that cannot be contained, controlled, or planned; and once it’s unlocked, it will drive the learner forward to want to know even more. The same could be said about the people of Jerusalem that day: the Galilean disciples and the multitudes of witnesses of this Pentecost miracle. The coming of the Holy Spirit – allowing for the barriers of language to be broken down – provides the momentum leading to the creation of the church.

Peter explains that this unusual display of multilingual pronouncements points to the presence of God’s Spirit within him and his companions. What does it mean? What is its significance? It means that God is here and that the time of God’s salvation has arrived.

Peter chooses a passage from the prophet Joel in the Jewish scriptures to help explain what is happening. He makes a few alterations to Joel’s declarations about God’s Spirit so that they will fit – or be more meaningful for – this current occasion. He adapts the ancient words to speak to new circumstances. Peter tells

² Greg Carey from *WorkingPreacher.com*

³ Willie James Jennings, *Acts* from *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*

the people that the Spirit is bestowing God's gifts upon all flesh, people of every age, gender, and status. Everyone who calls upon God is being saved.

What does this mean for us? What is its significance today? Just like people in the ancient world, we have a difficult time imagining that God is on the verge of doing a new thing; and that everyone – no matter where they come from, no matter their age, gender, or status – is a recipient of God's gifts. Sometimes, we are bound by our institutional thinking: we have been taught that people from particular places or backgrounds are favored by God. We have not allowed for the freedom of the Holy Spirit – the wild goose – that shows up in new ways, in different languages, and with dynamic power.

Theologian Willie James Jennings describes it this way: “The new wine has been poured out on those unaware of how deeply they thirsted... The followers of Jesus are being connected in a way that joins them to people in the most intimate space – of voice, memory, sound, body, land, and place.”⁴

The many languages of Pentecost invite people from various places; and representing a multitude of cultures. The Holy Spirit does not undo differences among people; instead, the Spirit blesses those differences. The same Spirit who initiates the miraculous speaking in foreign tongues at Pentecost will also create a community marked by its fellowship, worship, unity, and charity. The daily life of this community – Christ's church – may look more ordinary than the sights and sounds that the Pentecost story sets into motion, but Peter's words train our eyes to interpret such a community as yet another sign of God's transformative presence.⁵

In these disruptive and trying times, people look around them and ask, “what does this mean?” and “what am I supposed to make of this?” The book of Acts is full of stories about the followers of Jesus as they try to answer these questions for people in various places and different circumstances. As the church, we are challenged to do the same: to perceive what is taking place in our midst and try to find meaning in it; to understand and interpret it. And like linguists who are seeking full fluency, we must embrace the fullness of the moment: what are people reading and watching; what are we cooking and creating; how do we gather with and care for each other?

To be the Spirit-filled church requires this kind of love for learning. As we emerge from more than a year of pandemic disruption and upheaval, we will need to pay attention to all the mysteries and movements of the Spirit in and around us. Because, as much as we might have understood last year's world, it has changed in

⁴ Jennings, p. 32

⁵ Matthew Skinner, *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*

more ways than most of us can even imagine. Our neighborhoods, schools, stores, and churches will not be the same; habits, routines, and practices have and will continue to change. The way we think of and understand relationships and being in community are sure to be different.

This may not seem like good news; for most of us do not like change. And yet, what we can learn from the book of Acts is that the Christian journey – while it can sometimes feel as if we are on a wild goose chase – brings us to a new place, a different reality. Like the learner of a second or third or fourth language who comes to love everything about it – the people, the food, the culture, and the place – so can our passion for the salvation of God blossom and grow.

What does this mean? What is really going on? I invite you, on this Pentecost Sunday, to join a journey of discovery: practicing and seeking to understand that what the faith, hope, and love of God in scripture reveals to us – a peace which is beyond even human understanding – is the church's calling and its final destination. We may not have all the answers now; but the Spirit of God provides us – all of us – with the gifts we will need to take the next steps down the road. Amen.