

The Gift of Bold Speech
A Sermon on Acts 2:1-21
Pentecost Sunday
May 26, 2021

Introduction

Jesus has ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives after teaching the disciples for 40 days about the kingdom of God. He is sitting at the right hand of God. He has commanded the disciples to remain in Jerusalem and wait to be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Today's text is the story of how the power that animated Jesus during his ministry was given to the church. Jesus is baptized at the beginning of Luke's gospel. The disciples, who will become the church, are baptized at the beginning of Acts. It is also the story of God's dream for humanity: in the last days there will be universal salvation: all people will be prophets, all people will be vessels through whom God speaks. All people will be gathered into community with God and embrace God's values.

First Move: God's Dream

The story is set in Jerusalem during a religious festival. Luke is emphasizing that the audience is Jewish and that it represents all the people of the city.

The Jews observe the Festival of Weeks immediately after Passover. It lasts for seven weeks. Greek-speaking Jews called it Pentecost, which means 50 days. Pentecost is 50 days after Passover. For Christians, Pentecost is 50 days after Easter. It is rooted in the cycles of nature. It begins with the harvesting of barley and it ends seven weeks later with the harvesting of wheat. It is a time of thanksgiving and gladness. The people give thanks to God for bringing the rainy season and causing the crops to grow. The first fruits of the crops are offered to God. The people keep the rest for themselves.

Luke uses eschatological language. He says, "When the day of Pentecost is fulfilled." This means that the Festival is coming to its conclusion; it is about to reach its climax.

The miracle of Pentecost is described in the first four verses. The disciples are all together in one place. They are praying for God to send them the Spirit. Then God makes a dramatic appearance.

Luke strains for metaphors to describe the presence of God. Suddenly out of the heaven a sound *like* a strong wind fills the whole house where they were sitting. It is the sound that fills the house not wind. Then there appeared to them divided tongues *as if* fire, and a tongue rested on each of them. Fire was a way of purifying things. The prophet Isaiah said that he was a man of unclean lips, so an angel touched a coal to his lips to purify them. The fire purifies what the disciples will say. Fire also is a symbol of judgment. It shows that the disciples will have the power to bind and loose sins. The tongues of fire signify that the disciples have been appointed as prophets to tell about Christ and his deeds of power and to forgive sins of those who repent and turn to Christ.

The Spirit gives the disciples the gift of bold speech. The tongues filled each of the disciples with the Holy Spirit and caused them to speak out boldly in different languages.

Then the focus of the story shifts to the crowd's reaction to the gift of bold speech. The crowd consists entirely of Judeans. They come from all parts of the Roman Empire, and they have returned to live in Jerusalem.

There are two different reactions to the speaking in different languages. Some are amazed and marvel at it. But they dismiss it because everyone who is speaking in different languages is from Galilee. "Are not all who are speaking Galileans?" Galilee was the rural backwater of Israel. "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

Another reaction was even more skeptical. They mocked the speakers. "They have been filled with sweet new wine."

The crowd doesn't know how to interpret this dramatic event. The Spirit gives the disciples the ability to interpret Scripture, which also means they have the ability to interpret history and understand how God is working through history. Their eyes have been opened, as in the Emmaus story.

Peter stands and gives the first Christian sermon. He interprets the events through the lens of the gospel, which is what all preachers try to do.

Peter lifts his voice and speaks out boldly. Just 50 days earlier Peter was outside the high priest's house and had refused to admit to a slave girl that he knew Jesus. The Spirit has breathed new life into a once cowardly disciple and given him the gift of bold speech.

Peter responds to the taunts of the crowd. "These are not drunk as you suppose. They are fulfilling prophecy that was spoken through the prophet Joel.

Luke again uses eschatological language. Instead of beginning, "after these things," which is how the scripture in Joel reads, Luke's sermon for Peter begins, "And it will be in the last days." This is a sign that the present evil age is ending and

that the new age is coming. God says that in the new age I will pour out from my spirit on all flesh.

“Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.” Sometimes we reduce prophecy to predicting the future. In the Old Testament, prophecy means to speak for God. The prophet was a mouthpiece for God. He delivered God’s judgment to the people. Prophets pointed out the sins of the people in neglecting God’s ways, in taking advantage of the poor instead of caring for them. Prophets were rare, but when the new age comes, everyone will prophesy, sons and daughters, young men and old men. All people will turn to God.

It is an image of universal salvation. God says, “I will pour out from my spirit, even on my male slaves and my females slaves.” Men and women, even slaves, will prophesy. Everyone who calls on God will be saved. Being saved in the Gospel of Luke means that people will turn from their selfish ways and experience the new age, the kingdom of God. They will form a community shaped by love.

The scripture from Joel also has words of judgement, but Luke omits them. He wants to focus on redemption.

We only hear the first third of Peter’s sermon in today’s Scripture. Peter goes on to proclaim that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a sign that the new age has come. The people in the city respond to Peter’s bold speech. At the end of the sermon, 3,000 Judeans are baptized.

Second Move: A Nightmare Within a Dream

It is a beautiful dream. It is a dream not just for the church but for the whole society. Luke says that a multitude had gathered. Luke’s vision is that all people in the multitude, male and female, young and old, slave and free, will be filled with the Spirit. All people in the city will have the gift of bold speech.

A lot of people speak boldly today, but I wouldn’t call it a gift. It is hard to believe that God could be speaking through most of the voices we hear in the public arena. We don’t hear many people talking about the common good or about a vision for a good society. People are tearing other people down, playing upon people’s fears. They are seeking to build power for themselves or for their party.

Bold speech in Luke-Acts is speech that proclaims the good news. We need to hear that good news today more than ever. Sometimes it is hard to believe the good news, that God will act to build the kingdom.

Last year, CeCe Jones-Davis and I gave a dialogue sermon on this text. We called it *A Dream or a Nightmare?* We were certainly living through the nightmare

of Covid. We had gone 2½ months without worshiping in person. We were doing podcasts instead. The only people in the church during worship last year on Pentecost were the worship team of Mary and James and I. CeCe joined us for the dialogue sermon. Joel was here for moral support. At least we are coming out of that nightmare.

It was also just a few days after the murder of George Floyd. CeCe and I talked about whether we were living through a dream or a nightmare when it comes to racial justice. Were we any closer to Dr. King's dream of a Beloved Community or had the American dream become more like an American nightmare, as Malcolm X saw it?

CeCe believed that we were living through both. African Americans have been living through the nightmare of police killing people of color: Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Breonna Taylor. Trayvon Martin was killed by a vigilante in a white neighborhood. We will observe the 100th anniversary of the Greenwood Massacre this week. CeCe pointed out that police killings have been with us for decades; what has changed is that police killings are now recorded on video. She was still hopeful that all that pain and suffering was something that we must pass through to reach the dream of racial justice. Sometimes it takes that purifying fire of the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to the sin amongst us and purge it from our system.

I pointed out that African Americans are not the only targets of racism. Latinos, Muslims, and Asian Americans have all been victims of racism. Asian Americans have seen racism escalate against them in the past year.

In the last two weeks we have seen Palestinians rise up in protest against their dehumanization by Israel. We rarely hear the Palestinian narrative in America. It is about the confiscation of their lands, apartheid and occupation. Most Americans have not heard of the Nakhba, which took place in 1948. The Israeli army destroyed Palestinian cities in the new state of Israel and drove hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes, making them refugees in their own lands. Most Americans are unaware of the extent of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, which make a two-state solution impossible. There are 230 Israeli settlements throughout the West Bank and 60 checkpoints in the West Bank to protect the settlements. Six hundred thousand Israelis now live in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem and are protected by Israeli security forces. The West Bank is about the size of four counties in Oklahoma. Imagine 230 neighborhoods in four counties that are walled off from the rest of the counties. Imagine a foreign army that protects the foreign nationals in your country, who make up 25% of the population, and restricts the freedom of the 75% who are native-born citizens. The American press and American politicians have

accepted the Israeli narrative, which characterizes the Palestinians as terrorists and the Israelis as justifiably defending themselves.

We closed the sermon by acknowledging that it is not going to be police reforms and prison reform that eliminates racism. Those are good things, but racism will morph into something else.

In the last year we have seen millions of people march in support of Black Lives Matter. We also have seen a backlash. Far-right conservatives deny that there is such a thing as systemic racism—it is just a few bad cops, a few bad people. The Oklahoma legislature has passed a bill that shields drivers from liability for driving into protestors who are blocking a street. The Oklahoma legislature passed another bill that tries to control the narrative that is taught in public schools, prohibiting the teaching of critical race theory and teaching American exceptionalism instead. The bill wants to prevent the telling of the story of the oppression of black people.

Racism has been with us for 400 years. It is a living, mutating thing. It has evolved from slavery to black codes to segregation and Jim Crow to mass incarceration and the new Jim Crow. Now it is evolving into attacks on critical race theory. We have to change hearts and minds to purge racism from our system. We have to change the narrative. We have to recognize racism as original sin that still infects us.

We have to ask why racism persists. Why is racism still a thing? Racism is a product of dehumanizing the other, not caring about the other, treating the other as something less, as part of a lower caste. How do we get to the point that we recognize the other and accept the other? We have to bring the caste system to light and do away with it. We have to replace a narrative of white superiority with a narrative of the dignity of all people.

The gospel is still our best hope. The gospel responds that each of us is a beloved son or daughter of God. All the outcasts will be brought into community. God pours out the spirit on all flesh, men and women, young and old, male and female slaves. Our common humanity is at the core of the gospel.

Hearts and minds will be changed when they hear the gospel of nonviolence preached every week. Hearts and minds will be changed when people go from the pews each week and stand in solidarity with the outcasts who are suffering and oppressed. Hearts and minds will be changed when the sons and daughters of a loving God will no longer tolerate the crucifixion of people of color.

Conclusion

The gift of bold speech allows the spirit of God to flow through us. It gives us the courage to point out injustice in our society, but we are more than just nattering nabobs of negativism. We proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God.

God's vision becomes our vision. God opens our hearts and our minds to acknowledge the reality of sin among us and offer a new narrative to replace the false narratives of power and privilege. God fills us with the power to help bring the kingdom about. It is up to us to use that power for the good.

Copyright Donald F. Heath, Jr. 2021