

5-31-20 Pentecost Sunday Sermon “The Heart of the Matter”

Our passage from Acts chapter 2 today reminds us, among other things, that some personal names and place names found in scripture are difficult. Many of the Old Testament names of kings and places are horrific to try to read, as are many of the names in the genealogies of Jesus in the beginnings of Matthew and Luke - it's one reason some people give for not reading the Bible more often. Group names like Edomites, Moabites, Perizites, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians, are not easily untangled by the untrained tongue when reading scripture.

In the first church I served, the young woman who was reading the scriptures that day stood in the pulpit to bring the Gospel and with great confidence told the congregation about Jesus' conflicts with the Pharisees and the Seducees. Another pastor friend shared with me about how a liturgist at her church announced that the Epistle reading for that day came from Paul's letter to the Fallopians! You can't make this stuff up, folks.

In the last church I served we had a rotating schedule of liturgists who assisted in worship, reading scripture, etc. And as it turned out, for maybe 4 of the 6 years I served there the Pentecost reading came around to the same woman every year. Now, you just heard this passage with all of its place names - it's not an easy reading for the faint of heart. Well, each year it seemed that when Pentecost rolled around it fell to this woman to read Acts 2. The last time it happened,

she stepped to the pulpit to read, made a sly comment to the effect of “here we go again,” and began to read. Those of us who recognized that she had drawn the short straw once again had knowing grins on our faces as she began reading. When she got to the heart of the passage, with the names, she started into them, stumbled over a couple, and then paused. She then turned and looked at me sitting in the chair behind her, and said, “are you freaking kidding me?” I burst out laughing. Sometimes reading scripture causes us problems, and other times it’s the Holy Spirit that we read about in scripture that causes us problems.

This Pentecost is different. And why shouldn’t it be - Lent was different, Holy Week was different, Easter, Spring and Memorial Day were all different, everything is different this year. Pandemics will do that. Now we find ourselves in the midst of a great debate - a very partisan debate, unfortunately - about reopening church buildings, reopening the economy, wearing or not wearing masks, and whether or not people will get a vaccine if one is developed. And since we are dealing with this on the Sunday of Pentecost, as one commentator offered,

“I imagine that the story will be read, heard, and referenced in quite varied ways. Some will look to the boldness of the newly anointed disciples and suggest that just as they overcame their fears and went bravely into the city to proclaim the word, so also should congregations boldly claim their constitutional rights and re-open their buildings. Others may look to the posture of the disciples just ahead of the gift of the spirit - gathered together in prayer, waiting, and expectation - and suggest that is where we are just now, claiming the power of the Spirit to privilege the public good over individual rights.”^[1]

There are many factors that go into making these decisions. Different congregations in different regions, states, or communities, at different points in the spread of the virus, with different health care resources, with people at different risk levels, and in different sizes and types of facilities - may come to very different conclusions. That is the kind of discussion that our Church ReOpening Task Force began having this past week. And perhaps that is a good place for us to focus this Pentecost Sunday: that communities and peoples gathered in the name of Christ do not all look the same, they don't all face the same challenges in the same ways, they don't all have the same resources, and they will come to different decisions, not just about how to respond to a pandemic, but to many things. Yet, in spite of all these differences, we remain united as the people of God, called, equipped, sanctified, and sent to bear witness to God's love for all the world through both our words and our actions.

We've all heard this text from the Book of Acts before - it's the same text that is read every year at Pentecost, regardless of which year it is in the Revised Common Lectionary. I've preached this text a dozen times and heard it preached dozens more, as have most of you. And very often the focus of preaching this text is about the powerful wind that swept the Holy Spirit into the room, or the tongues of fire that rested on each of those gathered. We center on the power of the Holy Spirit in general or about how the Spirit empowered the people gathered to speak in other languages and be understood. We've probably all heard messages about Pentecost being the foundation, even the birthday, of the church - maybe we even had a birthday cake with candles and sang "Happy Birthday" to the church on Pentecost Sunday.

But this Pentecost is different. As Professor Debra Mumford, Professor of Homiletics at Presbyterian Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky suggests, “There may be a slightly different way of understanding this passage: the power of the Holy Spirit to transcend difference.”^[2] Mumford points out that, even though the passage consistently references the presence of men in the crowd to the exclusion of women, there certainly were many, many women present on this day, including Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of Jesus. She reminds us that the scripture passage that the Apostle Peter references in his sermon from Joel specifically points out that God would pour out the Spirit on both the sons and the daughters. And then she writes, “After the Holy Spirit invaded the space...” I love that turn of phrase, ‘invaded the space,’ “After the Holy Spirit invaded the space a crowd of thousands began to gather outside. In the crowd were Jews from many different nations including Greeks, Arabs, Romans, Africans, and Asians, just to name a few. Each of the people in the crowd could understand the conversation in...his [or her] own language.”

Now understand, we’re not talking about people “speaking in tongues” here - that is something totally different. This is a collection of people who are suddenly speaking in other languages and people being able to understand them. You might think of it as God’s take on the television show *Star Trek’s* universal translator, where the crew of the Enterprise were always able to speak to and understand life forms from other planets. But I digress...
Mumford continues,

“The power of the Holy Spirit was at work in the situation in so many ways:

1. The promise of the Holy Spirit compelled 120 people to gather in anticipation of it,” as our other scripture today from John’s gospel pointed out would happen. “They rearranged their schedules and synchronized their calendars to make themselves available to God,” she suggests.
2. “The power of the Holy Spirit enabled each person in that room to speak in a language other than their own.
3. “The power of the Holy Spirit got the attention of the crowd on the street, perhaps because of the rushing wind or the sheer chaos of all those people speaking at the same time.
4. “The power of the Holy Spirit emboldened Peter to speak to the masses.
5. “The power of the Holy Spirit caused the crowds to not only hear Peter’s message but to also receive it to such an extent that 3,000 people made a decision to follow Jesus.

On this one day, the Holy Spirit transcended **multiple layers of differences** to accomplish God’s many purposes.”^[3]

So, considering all that the Holy Spirit is capable of doing, what if, instead of arguing, accusing, and denigrating one another about what is the right or wrong way to handle a pandemic, we allowed the power of God’s Holy Spirit to reign in our lives and our communities, and especially in our churches? How many of our differences could be transcended? What miracles could the Spirit of the God of Love perform in our churches and communities if we embraced it and invited it into our midst?

How much healing could take place in our world, physical as well as emotional and economic, if we prayed for the Holy Spirit to have its way in our communities, our churches, and in our hearts? This Pentecost text provides an opportunity, a reminder even, of the power of the Holy Spirit to transcend our differences and to overcome those things that separate us from one another.

This Pentecost is different, though. Even as we consider the power of the Spirit of the Triune God, we must not lose sight of the fact that we are a community that follows a crucified Messiah. As David Lose points out,

“...that descriptor - ‘crucified’ - is important. Luke’s story of the expansion of the early Church tends at points to focus so singularly on the strengths, even the glory, of the early Christian movement. So much so, in fact, that it’s easy for us to miss that the Jesus to whom we are bearing witness is the one criticized because he included everyone, ridiculed because he took sides with the vulnerable rather than the powerful, rejected because he was not what people were expecting in a Messiah, and crucified in weakness and shame. And yet this is the One through whom God redeemed the world by communicating the life-giving news that God’s love is large enough to include everyone and powerful enough to defeat even death. The apparent boldness of the Apostles’ witness, therefore, should never be divorced from the apparent weakness of the God who comes to suffer rather than wage war and who returns sin with mercy rather than judgment. Just so, we find our unity not in acts of strength but primarily in our shared humanity, vulnerability, and need.”^[4]

The question that has been posed in such a way that its intent is not to overcome, but to create differences, is whether or not congregations are essential. But that question is moot. Of course congregations and the ministries we provide are essential. The more important question is whether opening our buildings and resuming gathering people in larger numbers is essential in light of the greatly increased risk this would entail. The church is not a building - it’s the people who respond in love to the call of Jesus in their lives. A follower of Jesus Christ can pray and worship regardless of whether a church building is open. We can enjoy fellowship regardless of whether we gather in person or

virtually. Again, the circumstances of different congregations will vary greatly, as will the opinions and commitments of the people who are part of those congregations, but our call remains the same - to allow ourselves to be open to the movement of the Spirit so that we may witness in word and deed to the love of God and to the Christ who came in weakness, identified regularly with the outcast and the marginalized, and who shared God's love for all with a particular concern for the most vulnerable.

Throughout this Easter season series, we have proclaimed that love is that which binds us to God, to Jesus, and to each other. Love IS our religion if we consider ourselves followers of the God who IS love. On the day of Pentecost, the church received the power of the Holy Spirit to let this message flow out FROM all TO all. The power of this message is even more important to offer to our world today, when politics divides us, when blatant racism kills more and more men and women of color each and every day, when greed guides many of our leaders to make decisions that benefit the few at the expense of the many, and when the number of dead and infected from the Covid-19 virus has reached mind-numbing levels. The good news, though, is that the Spirit of the God who IS love is poured out on each and every one of us. The power of that Spirit rests in us and on us to BE the church that Jesus Christ calls us to be for all the world. So let us be a community of Spirit-inspired messengers, letting living and loving compassion flow from our hearts to ALL God's people. Because in the end, that is the heart of the matter. Amen!

^[1] "In the Meantime," by David Lose, DavidLose.net., accessed 5/27/20.

^[2] Commentary on Luke 2, Dr. Debra Mumford, workingpreacher.org., accessed May 27, 2020

^[3] Ibid.

^[4] Commentary on Acts 2, David Lose, [workingpreacher.org](https://www.workingpreacher.org), accessed May 27, 2020.