

*A sermon given on June 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019 – Pentecost Sunday – based upon Acts 2:1-21.*

Once more we will take this week's story in segments, so I can comment along the way.

In Luke's Gospel, before the risen Jesus departed from earth, he instructed his disciples to "stay in Jerusalem until they had received power from on high." It was not yet time to launch forth into some great course of action.

Sometimes the best thing to do when we initially find ourselves at a crossroads in our lives is to do nothing – at first, at least.

To wait, to be still. To trust that the way forward **will** be revealed.

And so the apostles – dozens of them -- sat around for several weeks doing very little other than praying, and certainly pondering all that they had recently been through with Jesus -- his ministry, death, and resurrection. Their time with him had revealed that much of what they **thought** they knew about God and about themselves was simply wrong.

It was as if they needed a time to let go of their instinct to rely upon their own strength and to empty themselves of their preconceived notions of reality so they could be filled with God's power and direction.

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.*

What we know as "Pentecost" was first a great Jewish harvest festival that took place seven weeks after Passover – the festival that had brought Jesus and his disciples to Jerusalem.

And it was on the day of Pentecost that something very strange took place, something we find Luke struggling to put into words. He resorts to what we learned in fourth grade are called "similes."

*And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.*

A sound "**like**" the rush of a violent wind.

The wind is violent – which is to say that sometimes the Spirit must tear down existing structures before something new and life-giving can be created. An example I believe can be found in what is occurring in what has been known as "The United Methodist Church" -- the Spirit is blowing in a way that is leading to the collapse of old structures in order to make room for the Spirit to move.

*Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them.*

Again, another simile: "Divided tongues, as of fire."

Not actual fire, but **like** fire. This conjures up the ancient story of Moses appearing before the burning bush, encountering the mystery of God's presence. But in this case the divine presence is found in actual flesh and blood people.

***All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.***

The Spirit calls forth lots of spoken words from many different languages.

Words at their best provide human beings with a means of connection. And that is precisely what these Holy Spirit-inspired-words do – they begin connecting people who otherwise felt disconnected.

***Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.***

So the great Harvest Festival known as Pentecost had drawn Jews to Jerusalem who had made their homes throughout the known world – Jews who speak the languages of the places they now call home.

If you happen to visit a land where people speak another language – the sound of people speaking your native language instinctively captures your attention.

Such was the case this day in Jerusalem -- pilgrims from the far corners of the earth find themselves irresistibly drawn to the recognizable words coming out of the house where the apostles are gathered, who now apparently the apostles are led by the Spirit to spill out into the streets to interact with the crowd of people.

***Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?”***

The pilgrims are amazed and astonished. Galileans weren't known for being sophisticated world travelers. They're backwoods types. And yet suddenly the words they hear these Galileans speaking make the visitors to Jerusalem feel right at home. And feeling truly “at home” in a strange place is a wonderful thing.

To drive home the fact that what is happening here is drawing essentially this whole, divided world together, Luke goes on to list what was at the time essentially every known nation and tribe that inhabited the earth, giving Bob the challenge of reading all these names that nobody really knows for sure how to pronounce:

***Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.”***

There is this ancient story found in Genesis 11 – a myth really – in which the first human beings build a great tower up into the heavens in a place called “Babel” in order that they “might make a name for themselves.” It was an act of supreme arrogance that denied their utter dependence upon God who had given them life itself.

The tower came crashing down -- the result being the human race gets spread across the earth into separate tribes that speak different languages. No longer able to understand one another, the result is walls of suspicion and mistrust that breed hostility.

Here, however on the Day of Pentecost those ancient divisions are overcome by this Spirit-induced miracle. The barriers caused by separate languages are transcended. People are connected in a shared reverence for “God’s deeds of power” which they each hear spoken of in their own language.

*All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”*

Some of the people witnessing what is taking place appropriately acknowledge the limits of their knowledge in the face of this great, holy mystery and ask what it all means.

Others however lack such humility.

*But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”*

“There’s really nothing new here,” these others sneer. “Just a bunch of drunks speaking gibberish. That’s all.”

Now, if we ask the question: why would some people recognize that a miracle was occurring and feel humbled and awestruck, while others would be oblivious? the answer, after a bit of reflection becomes obvious.

The people who mock the apostles as drunks are the people who live in Jerusalem year round. They are the locals who **expect** to hear – feel **entitled** to hear -- their own language spoken. They are the “insiders” who are intent on holding onto the special status that comes with being insiders. The miracle that is taking place implies that now **everybody** is an “insider”, and that, from their perspective is a threat to their power.

*But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning.*

Peter rises to address the crowd. Call to mind his famous back story.

Just seven weeks earlier at the Passover meal – what we know better as the “Last Supper” -- Peter had arrogantly claimed to possess the “right stuff” -- to be superior to the other disciples when he declared “these others may abandon you Lord but I will never abandon you.”

Later that same night the truth of the old saying from Proverbs, “**pride cometh before fall**” would be clearly on display when -- overwhelmed with terror -- Peter denied knowing Jesus three times.

The Holy Spirit does many things in this world, and one of the things we like to think of it doing is comforting people – a role Jesus speaks of in John’s Gospel.

But sometimes before the Holy Spirit comforts it is like a violent wind that breaks us – shattering the pride that imagines ourselves self-sufficient and in control.

This breaking can come in all kinds of ways – and usually -- as it was for Peter – it involves some tremendous pain, but this breaking is necessary to allow us to be re-created – to allow us to become “new creations” in Christ.

So the previously broken and now recreated Peter – no longer pride-filled but instead God-filled – rises to speak – an open vessel of God’s message of love for all people. And he proceeds to quote a passage from the book of the prophet Joel.

***No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,***

“In the last days” – the last days of the old era in which God’s presence was understood to be confined to the Temple in Jerusalem and access to that presence under the control of the elite – the priests who ran things there.

In quoting Joel’s prophecy, Peter declares that the old era is coming to an end; God is doing a new thing in which God’s Spirit is poured out on everybody. All that is required on our parts is a humble willingness to let go and receive it.

***and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young ones shall see visions, and your old ones shall dream dreams.***

God will communicate through our sons and daughters – including those who will be confirmed in two weeks. And old ones like me who are tempted at times to feel like we are washed up – we, too are invited to embrace this new age as the Spirit gives us the capacity to dream new God-inspired dreams.

***Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.***

As Paul will write later, in Christ there is neither male nor female, slave nor free but we are all one in Christ Jesus. This new thing God is doing reveals the truth that all people are absolutely equal in the sight of God – and all are invited to join the dance of the Spirit.

***And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.***

Again, the prophet resorts to extraordinary metaphorical language to speak of mysteries that words cannot adequately express.

In this new age, old certainties give way as the power of God brings about signs and wonders. And the Spirit's most basic sign and wonder is the creation of true community where all can feel deep sense of being "at home."

Later that same day, 3000 human hearts will be opened up to the grace of God revealed in the Jesus proclaimed by Peter. The church will suddenly grows 30 times larger. Healing and reconciliation will take place -- just like it did when Jesus walked the earth.

The kingdom of God will be experienced as present here on earth -- with the most astonishing sign that this was taking place will be that all these people who previously were strangers to one another will be moved by a mighty love to share all they have so that no one is in need.

Imagine that: a world where Spirit-inspired sharing and caring means no one is left homeless or hungry.

***Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'***

And this is all grace -- this is all God's doing. Salvation, reconciliation, wholeness -- not as a reward for human achievement but rather as a gift given freely to humble hearts -- simply because this is the nature of God.

This is not just an old fairy tale. This is a story about the reality of the Holy Spirit and what it continues to do in this world through lives that are broken open in a way that allows us to be led.

The problems plaguing the human race can seem pretty overwhelming. Sometimes it can seem like things are just getting worse and worse -- that things are falling apart -- that we are descending into chaos.

The story of Pentecost is helpful in such a time as this.

The story tells us that sometimes people and societal structures need to be broken before they can be recreated.

One of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to function as a midwife. What can feel like nothing but chaos and destruction can in fact be the birth pains that lead to a new creation. Sometimes things really do have to get worse before they get better.

And sometimes -- our story tells us -- rather than to claim we understand what's going on, it is better to say "In this moment of time I am clueless -- I don't understand what's going on or what

needs to happen,” because such words express the posture of humility through which the Spirit can move.

Another thing the story of Pentecost tells us is that the ultimate answers to our problems won't be found in the places we typically look: for instance, more education, better technology, a stronger economy, better leadership.

Though these things have a role to play, our fundamental need is spiritual, not physical. This is an idea I'm hoping we are planting in our young people who will be confirmed in two weeks.

What we need most are humble hearts that are willing to be led by the Holy Spirit – to be taken possession of by a love that is deeper and wider than our minds can grasp – to begin to see life as God sees it.

That all people are of infinite worth.

That we really all are connected at our deepest core, no matter our outward differences.

That to be together in God's great family we don't need to all think and act alike – that our differences in culture, ethnicity, political perspective are not a problem to overcome but something in fact to celebrate.

Notice this in the miracle of Pentecost: The people from different countries don't cease to speak different languages – they just no longer function as a barrier. There was room in the circle for all.

I want to finish by calling attention to our mission statement which is actually an expression of the truth of Pentecost. Here's part of what it says:

***Our spirituality is based on JESUS and His love and compassion.*** (That's how you can tell if something is the work of the Holy Spirit – it only does the sorts of things Jesus did when he walked upon this earth.)

***We provide a community of support and healing where all are welcomed*** (invited to feel at home like those pilgrims two thousand years ago in Jerusalem,)

***all are welcomed and valued regardless of age, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability or economic status. In a world where people feel they can love only those who are like themselves, we seek to celebrate the uniqueness of every human being.***

I would like to share something incredibly special with you all. A day we will never forget. Today we took our little boy Ralph to [Universal Orlando Resort](#) for the first time. Ralph is awesomely autistic, and we are proud to be a neurodiverse family. As wonderful, loving, intelligent and incredible as Ralph is, sometimes he struggles. (Don't we all?) When he struggles the hardest, he can have something known as an "autistic meltdown". Some people who are not educated about autism might see it as a temper tantrum. But the fact of the matter is that it is not the act of a spoiled and naughty child. It's a cry for help. This is Ralph's way of saying "I don't know how to monitor and regulate my emotions right now. I need help, please! I'm scared! I'm overwhelmed! I want to feel better and I don't know how!". And here came Jen to the rescue.

First I should explain that Ralph was EXTREMELY excited to ride the Spiderman ride at Islands of Adventure. He kept on asking us if the ride was coming up soon, and we would reassure him and say "Soon, Baby. Soon. First there are other rides before that one. That one is at the end. It's the last island. So we have to ride the other ones first. Okay?" He was SO patient for SO long. As patient as he possibly could be. He would say "Okay" and sigh, and then enjoy the next ride. But all the while, the excitement was building up to the pinnacle of his day: The Spiderman ride near the exit of Islands of Adventure.

So when we finally got there and handed them his handicap-access tickets which would make his waiting time a little bit more bearable (he would still have to wait the same amount of time, just not in a physical line), he was upset that we had to walk away from Spiderman in order to find a nice cool air conditioned place in which we could wait until it was our turn to ride. He was as patient as could be while we sat there as a family for the 15 minutes it would take until we could go back and walk in.

The anticipation was driving him wild! But he did his very best to regulate it with the tools he has been given over the years by his teachers and therapy team at his special needs school back home. They, and he, are all AMAZING.

When we finally got back to Spiderman, he was leaping for joy. He thought "OH WOW! This is IT! FINALLY!" and you should have seen the SMILE on his face. It was incredible. Then when it was almost our turn to board, and he could see the end in sight, the vehicles right in front of us, we got the news that the ride had broken down. Everyone was very nicely asked to exit. And Ralph, understandably, lost it. (Wouldn't you?). My husband and I know the signs. We could see it coming, like an oncoming train. And yet we couldn't dodge out of the way. There was nowhere else to go. The autistic meltdown was GOING to HAPPEN. And happen it DID.

Ralph collapsed onto the floor while crowds of people were attempting to exit the ride and the gift shop attached to it. He began sobbing, screaming, rocking, hyperventilating, and truly struggling to breathe. A woman who worked there named Jen came over... no... no, she RUSHED over... and while I frantically kept trying to get him to stand up so he wouldn't get trampled on by people, she encouraged me to leave him on the floor if that is where he needed to be. Then she did this. She got down on the floor WITH HIM. She rested next to him while he cried his heart out, and she helped him breathe again. She spoke to him so calmly, and while he screamed and sobbed, she gently kept encouraging him to let it all out. She told people to keep on walking around them, so they would stop standing there and staring. And then she told him it was okay for him to be sad and feel this way. She understood. She would feel the same way too. His feelings were validated. And she told him he could lay there with her as long as he needed to until he felt better.