

We Are Family

Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost, May 31, 2009

Whitefish UMC

- † What would you say if I asked you this question: “Are you Pentecostal?” I think I can guess, but let me tell you a strange story about a very famous preacher, Fred Craddock. He was about to give a lecture at a west coast seminary, when one of the students stood up and said, “Before you speak, I need to know if you are Pentecostal.”
- † The room grew silent. Craddock said he looked around for the dean of the seminary, who was nowhere to be found. So the student continued his quiz, asking the same question. Craddock said, “Do you mean do I belong to the Pentecostal Church?”
- † The student said, “No, I mean are you Pentecostal?” And the preacher said, “Are you asking me if I am a charismatic?” “No, I am asking if you are Pentecostal,” said the student. “Do you want to know if I speak in tongues?” He said, “I want to know if you are Pentecostal.”
- † And Craddock said, “I don’t know what your question is.” The student said, “Obviously you are not Pentecostal.” He left.
- † Do we even know what we mean when talk about Pentecost, let alone celebrate it? It’s an ironic and puzzling twist to a day that is about the birth of the church universal—a church that transcends boundaries of language, culture, and other divisions.
- † It’s a strange scripture—foreign, really, to our experience. The words are, ironically again, hard to pronounce and difficult to experience for

our own. But Pentecost is about a life-giving spirit that creates miracles and births something new.

- † On the day itself, Pentecost, several weeks after Passover, the city of Jerusalem was once again filled with pilgrims from all over the world ready to celebrate the Jewish Festival of Weeks. All daily work was to be set aside, and each person was called to bring a gift to God in proportion to the blessing God had given.
- † No one was to be excluded. The guest list was God’s guest list and was clearly stipulated in the scriptures for all to read: “Listen, the following are invited: You, your sons and daughters, your men servants and maid servants, the Levites in your towns, the aliens, the fatherless and the widows among you.”
- † The festival celebrated the day the Law was given to Moses on Mount Sinai. The law was meant to help the people learn to live in relationship to God and to one another, but how it had been misused for purposes other than love of God, self, and neighbor.
- † The disciples of Jesus—remember, they were observant Jews and so gathered for this important Jewish festival—were wondering what to do next. If you were one of the few at church over the Memorial Day weekend, you know that the scriptures say that Jesus had just been taken up to heaven to sit at the right hand of God.
- † These disciples must have thought: “Now what?” Then Luke, the writer of Acts, says, there was a rushing wind and tongues of fire. El Greco portrayed the scene in a famous painting with the disciples of Jesus sitting in a row with a flame on each head like a small propane jet. (No wonder Pentecost makes some of us a little squeamish.)

- † But despite the imagery, we do know that what happened was a powerful experience: the disciples were filled with God's Spirit. And they were powerfully transformed. They became courageous, determined, strong, disciples of Jesus Christ—and they found their voice—and their ears.
- † Yes, from the first Pentecost experience has come modern Pentecostalism, the fastest growing form of Christianity in every part of the world—literally sweeping through Latin America, Asia, and Africa.
- † Most of us, when we think of Pentecostals, think they are politically and theologically conservative, biblical fundamentalists. But that is not necessarily so. Their expressions of faith are full of exuberance and high emotion.
- † Pentecostal worship is full of spontaneity, clapping, shouting, weeping, singing, and occasionally speaking in tongues, an experience of religious ecstasy where an individual speaks with sounds that are new and unrecognizable to others.
- † But look carefully at today's scripture reading about the first Pentecost. The real miracle was not speaking in tongues that were not understandable, but the very opposite.
- † The real miracle is that those upon whom the Spirit fell could understand each other—even though the language was unrecognizable. The people from all different cultures, lands, and perspectives could really listen to each other and understand.
- † How far the church and the world have come from that great day. How can we forget that the very first effect of God's Spirit at

- Pentecost was to bring people together? The Spirit drew these very different people into a common understanding of the same gospel.
- † And yet, try as we might, the church and the world grow increasingly divided. Occasionally there are glimpses of hope for a meeting of the minds and the hearts, but they seem few in these days of incinerator politics and intolerance among religions—including among Christians.
 - † As I prepared this sermon, I was in an email dialogue with one of my brother pastors in Whitefish about the right way to interpret scripture. Suffice it to say that we have very different points of view. At one point he accused me of throwing out the parts of the bible that I disagreed with and were politically incorrect. He worried about whether I was truly saved. He wondered whether I was offering you, our congregation, “false gods.”
 - † After a long, hard week, I nearly lost it with him. I wrote back something like, “You don’t need to worry about my salvation—I trust that to God!” or something equally petulant. “If you really believe I am offering our congregation false gods, then we having nothing more to say to each other,” I added for good measure.
 - † To his credit, he wrote back more gently, saying he genuinely wanted to understand how I came to a less than literal interpretation of certain hot-button scriptures that are in the public sphere these days.
 - † I told him I was working on a Pentecost sermon about universal understanding and listening. He was intrigued, said he had never thought about it that way before, and wished me well.
 - † Does the Holy Spirit mean for us to inhale, and exhale ideas and viewpoints and behaviors that tend to drive wedges between people?

- I don't think so. And sometimes it takes the power of God's spirit to keep us in the conversation.
- † You know that. Aren't there times in your own family, in your own life, that you are tempted to quit listening with an open mind and heart? There are times like that in our own precious church, so filled with the Spirit today.
 - † It's tough to stay in the conversation directly, gently, openly, lovingly. It's so easy to demonize someone with whom you disagree. But Spirit-filled people listen to each other in love.
 - † Because we are indeed family. Today especially. How fitting to be reminded of God's adoption of each one of us into the family of Christ by remembering Charlie's baptism. How marvelous a reminder to welcome new members of different ages, parts of the country, religious histories, into our church.
 - † *{insert discussion of "We Are Family" by Sister Sledge in 1979 and after 9/11 if it's not been played.}*
 - † The capacity to communicate, to speak and to hear, is always a gift from God. It is to be in communion with one another. One writer says it is what defines us as human beings—this miraculous ability. Everyone else in creation acts out of chemical messages, instincts, and urges.
 - † We alone talk to one another, consider what others have to say, listen to others before we act. We speak, and occasionally we listen—with God's help—even when we'd rather not.
 - † If you want to deny the very being of another person or group or culture—then refuse to listen. There is no better way to kill intimacy

than to stop listening. And there is no better way to love than to really listen and try to understand.

- † “That is what happened on Pentecost. God’s Spirit came—people spoke, people heard, people understood. And part of what they understood that day was the love of God and the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, that would always be with them to inspire, to empower, to lift them up when they fell, to comfort them when they grieved, to bind up their wounds, to love them forever. A miracle.” (Buchanan)
- † So let me ask you again: “Are you Pentecostal?” If our church is alive in the world it is Pentecostal. And you thought we were Methodists! And we are.
- † May the Holy Spirit work in our church to help us speak the truth in love and to listen deeply to one another. For we are family—God’s beloved children, brothers and sisters all. Thanks be to God.

Sources:

John Buchanan, “Listen,” <http://fourthchurch.org>

Brett Blair, “Are You Pentecostal?” www.esermons.com

Grace Imathiu, “The Day Heaven Burst Open,” <http://day1.org>