

Sermon for Pentecost – “Straight Talk”

Texts: Acts 2:1-21; 1 Corinthians 12:3-13

A conscientious homeowner once wrote to a company that made cast iron pipes. He told them that he'd found that by pouring pure hydrochloric acid down the drain, he immediately cleared pipes that were clogged with grease. He asked if the acid might be at all harmful to the pipes. The pipe company wrote back to him; the letter said, “Thank you for your letter. The consequence of such acid upon ferrous-constructed materials is certain to be deleterious. We, therefore, strongly urge you to terminate such activity for the welfare of your plumbing.” The homeowner read the letter and responded. He thanked the company for the letter and said that he was relieved that he was doing the right thing in using acid in the pipes. Another letter came from the pipe company; “We fear that there may have been some miscommunication in our previous correspondence. Acid of that density applied to cast iron piping, is certain to have pernicious results. Therefore, please desist from your prevailing practices.” The homeowner again wrote back, thanking the company for the reassurance that he was doing nothing which might harm the pipes. Finally, an exasperated manufacturer sent a telegram that read: “Don't use acid. It rusts the hell out of the pipes!”

The difficulties of effective communication are obvious to us all. How often do we hear that some dispute or problem all comes down to a communication issue! The ancient Celtic church used a noisy wild goose as a symbol of the Holy Spirit but most of us are much more familiar with the cooing gentleness of a white dove. Is the Holy Spirit a noisy and somewhat aggressive wild goose or an altogether more domesticated and timid dove? Hmmm – maybe it's time for some plain talking about Pentecost.

You may be familiar with the Pentecost hymn that contains the words “Breathe on me, breath of God, fill me with life anew...” But what exactly do we expect of that sung prayer? The disciples were doing as Jesus had commanded them. They were waiting in Jerusalem. This is an expectant waiting. The opposite of passive waiting which stops living; an expectant waiting prepares for what is coming. The disciples are waiting to be energized. And, of course, their wait wasn't in vain. We all know what happened... **Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like a mighty rushing wind, filling the room.** Looking around they could see as it were tongues of fire dancing on each other's heads. Filled with the Holy Spirit they began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability. As so often in scripture, the story is rich in symbolism and meaning. I think that unpacking some of those things will help our plain talking that we too may be grasped by the Spirit.

At the heart of this story is a God who communicates. But, notice from where the Spirit comes. It comes from outside of the room in which they were waiting. It's not something that wells up from within them. It's completely ‘other’ to them, as individuals or as a group. The Holy Spirit comes from the outside – from God. What this means is that if we're looking for the Spirit to be active in our lives we should be looking for something that's beyond us. We must look outside of ourselves. We must look to God the Creator and to Jesus. And, notice what the Spirit coming to them achieved first, through the Spirit's action they were empowered to witness to Jesus Christ. Because of the festival there were pilgrims in Jerusalem from all kinds of foreign places, and each one heard these uneducated peasants from Galilee speak in their own language about God's deeds of power. What a shock, how could these guys speak these languages? No Rosetta Stone in those days, but speak these foreign languages they did. Enabled by the Spirit the disciples proclaim the name of Jesus to all who happened to be in Jerusalem on that day so very long ago. It was a unique and unrepeatable event.

Never again in the New Testament will it be recorded that Christian believers inspired by the Spirit speak in the languages of other people. Yes, speaking in tongues will be mentioned exactly three more times (twice more in Acts, once in 1 Corinthians). But not like what we read about today. In the other instances, what's being heard is largely unintelligible, ecstatic language. But here, the disciples witness in intelligible languages. Elsewhere the unintelligible languages are a sign of God's Spirit in people's lives as in many churches today. But that's not what happened at Pentecost. What was going on here was so remarkable that some scoffed: "Oh, they're drunk," they said. "This can't be real." But it **was**. So Peter, cut by the scoffing and ridicule, speaks up. "It's too early in the day to be drunk! "Understand," he says, "that what you see and hear is the amazing fulfilment of a prophecy made long ago by the prophet Joel." Joel, of course, had said that in the last days God would pour out his Spirit on all humankind. "Your sons and your daughters will prophesy, your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. In those days I will pour out my Spirit and they shall prophesy." And what do you know, Joel's prophecy had come true!

In the ancient scriptures the Spirit of God rested on certain, **special** people and only for a **limited** period of time, but it's not like that in the days after Jesus. No, in this **new** day the Spirit of God will be poured out on **everyone** and for **all** time. This is what living in the light of Christ does. Jesus is the source of what is going on here. Continuing, Peter is bold in what he says... "Jesus of Nazareth was attested before you by God with power, wonders and signs, yet you crucified and killed him. But God raised him from the dead – 'This Jesus God raised up and of that we are all witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.'" The language is complex but the essential idea is a simple one. Jesus is the one who pours out the Spirit. Jesus is the source of the Spirit by the action of God the Father in him. The story of Jesus – the way we tell it, inhabit it, pray on it, and live it – is all we need to receive the Spirit.

The story of the first Pentecost ends with the crowd's response to Peter; here's where we need to pay close attention because we're with the crowd. As I said what happened to the disciples is a one and done thing. What happened to the crowd isn't. It happened, it happens, and it will happen again. The crowd was deeply affected when they heard Peter tell them they were responsible for Jesus' death. They hadn't thought about it that way before, and neither do we, because we too are responsible for Jesus' death. Think about it... How easily the words "He died for us" or "He died for our sins" fall from our lips. What else can they really mean? Realizing their culpability the crowd demanded of Peter and the others, "What shall we do?" This is what the crowd cries out to the disciples. This is our cry too – what shall we do?!?! Peter's response is direct. He tells the crowd, "repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Peter answers the cry of people in every age who are confronted with the reality of human sinfulness and brokenness. In face of the impulse to death and corruption, Peter responds, confronting the fickleness and evil and sin that caused Jesus' death and the countless corruptions that mimic it. Peter urges repentance and baptism in the name of Jesus Christ so that the Holy Spirit can be received to make lives new.

As a people united, wait on God, he tells them, "Repent, live a baptized life, and receive the Spirit's grace."

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing. We, the Church (with a capital "C"), are a Pentecost church. We have been and always will be a Pentecost church. We are a fellowship, a family, from every known corner of the earth that encompasses and embraces all who sincerely cry with that Pentecost crowd, "What shall we do?"

We have been given an answer. We, the church, are called and enabled by the Spirit to proclaim God's deeds of power and grace in the life and death of Jesus. We, the church, are given the Spirit of Pentecost to participate in what God is doing in our midst by the power of the Spirit working among us and within us.

"Breathe on me, breath of God, fill me with life anew." Life anew – God's Pentecost promise to us.

Now that's straight talk.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.