

## Sunday, June 9, 2019 – Pentecost Sunday

### **The First Reading is from the Acts of the Apostles 2:1-4**

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

### **The Second Reading is from the Gospel of John 14:12-17, 25-27**

<sup>12</sup> Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup> I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup> If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it. <sup>15</sup> “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. <sup>16</sup> And I will ask the Father, and he will ***give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.*** <sup>17</sup> ***This is the Spirit of truth,*** whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I have said these things to you while I am still with you. <sup>26</sup> ***But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.*** <sup>27</sup> Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

## **The Message is entitled, *The Gift***

I want you to bring to mind a gift that you received. But let me be a little more specific about what type of gift. I want you to bring to mind a gift that you received that seems to keep on giving, long after it has been first unwrapped.

The gift that came to mind for me was the gift of a grant through Columbia Theological Seminary. Along with 19 other pastors I was gifted with an incredible pilgrimage to Israel. Now I had to apply to be a recipient of this gift, but the sheer fact that over 80 pastors applied and I was one of only 20 selected, was sheer gift.

Seven years into my first call, I was in deep need of renewal and an email just happened into my inbox one day, because I had taken a continuing education course with Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, at Columbia Theological Seminary. I can still remember receiving that email, because when I read it my heart leapt with possibilities. The grant was designed for pastoral renewal, just what my pastoral soul deeply desired.

The first four-day gathering at the conference center at Emory University was a gift in itself. Then there was the 15-day pilgrimage to Israel, with a week in Tiberias just steps away from the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee and another week in Jerusalem just steps away from the old walled City of Jerusalem. For two-weeks we traveled to sites, as we reflected individually and communally, engaging the places where Jesus walked as found in our scriptures. And if these weren't gifts enough, we gathered again at a retreat center two months after we returned from Israel to reflect on our pilgrimage together.

You can probably hear in my voice that this gift is still giving, for a smaller part of our group continued to meet annually for eight more years. The deep relationships we forged through our common experience and annual retreats, reflecting on our respective ministries, connect us to this day. The gift of the grant I receive in 2009, almost ten years ago, is a gift that keeps on giving.

Jesus said to his disciples in the opening chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait there for the promised gift, the gift the will be with you forever... for you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

In our sea of reds and oranges, we gather to celebrate this very gift today, the gift of the Holy Spirit. We gather to hear the old, old story once again, “They were all gathered together in one place. And suddenly...” The panoramic, pyrotechnic Pentecost occurs as a mighty rushing wind swirls, and dancing flames spread like a wild fire, coming to rest upon everyone gathered. In an instant, all shall be changed we read in Corinthians! The gathering was instantly changed, transformed, so much so, that devout Jewish pilgrims from near and far were drawn to the swirling dancing commotion.

“How can it be,” the Jewish pilgrims said, “We’re hearing them talk in our various mother tongues?” Given the context of our ministry setting, wouldn’t it be wonderful if all of a sudden we could speak in each other’s languages and completely understand each other? If I could suddenly speak and understand Indonesian or Chichewa, Urdu or Bayan, Spanish or Korean? If suddenly we could understand each other’s cultural

idioms that are often untranslatable? What if this Pentecostal moment happened right here and right now among us?

I imagine our heads would be spinning, too, which is the way Eugene Peterson translates this particular verse in the Acts of the Apostles, as hearing and understanding each other in all our diverse languages would shock and surprise us too, even though we have read this story year after year after year. Of course, some among us might try to brush it off as an anomaly or a figment of our imaginations or maybe even that it was alcohol or drug induced as hearers of the first Pentecost did.

When the Spirit moves, we often do not know what to do. So, the church – at least most of the universal Christian church – has neatly shelved the Holy Spirit, only pulling the Holy Spirit out and dusting her off once a year to decorate our sanctuaries in reds. I find it odd given that the Spirit is the forever gift, the gift that keeps on giving, we only find her color “red” on our church calendar once a year! We have purple during Advent and Lent, white during Eastertide and other specific days, green for the long ordinary seasons between and then red, Spirit filled red, once and only once on Pentecost Sunday.

It seems easy for us Presbyterian types to keep the Spirit shelved, because we don't have many Pentecostal moments in our style of worship, no speaking in tongues or being slayed in the spirit. Most of our worship is planned decently and done in order. Even our denominational history since the 1700's here in America, we have struggled repeatedly with the “holiness” movements, which worked to reclaim the gift of the Holy Spirit. So, what are we to do with this forever gift, the Holy Spirit in our 21<sup>st</sup> century setting?

May I suggest we look at John's Gospel for some insights. The word translated as "Advocate" in John 14:16 and in again John 14:26 is the Greek word "parakletos," which literally means "the one called alongside." The Advocate came alongside the disciples 2000 years ago and comes along side of us today. This Holy Spirit continually opens our eyes, pokes us in the ribs, and reminds us of the larger truth revealed in and through Jesus.

As the first Pentecost suggests, with the gift of the Holy Spirit at our side, we are transformed, yet some of these transformations (or more likely most of these transformations) are much subtler than that first Pentecost, but by no means less powerful.

Just as John's version of the Pentecost is subtler than the version found in Acts. Listen to these words from the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, for Jesus said, "Peace to you... then Jesus took a deep breath and breathed into the disciples, saying, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" No whipping wind or dancing wildfire, just a deep breath breathed into us.

This deep breath within us leaves us "whole and well," according to Peterson's translation. This deep breath within us gives us access to peace in the midst of the chaos of our lives and world. This deep breath can transform us.

As Jurgen Moltmann, a German Protestant theologian writes, "The gift and the presence of the Holy Spirit is the greatest and most wonderful thing which we can experience – we ourselves, the human community, all living things and this earth. For with the Holy Spirit [at our side] it is not just one random spirit that is present... it is God himself, the creative and life-giving, redeeming and saving God. Where the Holy Spirit is

present, God is present in a special way, and we experience God through our lives.” [*The Source: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life*]. For Moltmann, “The Holy Spirit is the experienced presence of God.”

When we experience the mystery we call God, whether here in the midst of worship or spell bound by an expansive natural vista, whether we are beholding a newborn or laughing with friends, whether we are embracing those deeply suffering or witnessing joy unbound, we are having a “Pentecostal” moment because in that moment we are transformed, connected to a whole greater than ourselves.

That is why Jesus dares to say to his disciples [and to all of us here today], “The person who trusts me, will not only do what I’m doing but even greater things... because of the gift that keeps on giving.”

With the Spirit alongside, you can... we can... do even greater things... the possibilities are endless.

Yet, do we believe this? Will we live into this truth with our very lives?

Or will we short change that gospel and just dust-off Pentecost and celebrate it as an extraordinary historical event once a year, only to reshelve it as soon as worship is over today?

“Whatever you request along the lines of who I am and what I am doing, I’ll do it,” says Jesus according to Peterson’s translation. Friends, God is ready, but are we? “Will we claim the gift that keeps on giving and get to work on Jesus’ agenda of wholeness for each of us, for this church, for our community and this world?

Let's get to work, trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit to come alongside and work with us. Pentecost, my friends, is an everyday experience! The question is only, are we open to this reality?

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Open our eyes and hearts, equip and inspire us to work towards Jesus' agenda of wholeness for all of humanity and creation with our very lives. Amen.