

May 22, 2016

“Come Holy Spirit, Come”

Sermon by Rev. Robert English



Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. 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. 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? 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.” All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

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. 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, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. 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. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

I can remember being confused, bewildered and a little unsettled the first time I traveled to my wife’s childhood home in Franklin, Indiana almost 10 years ago. As we drove from the airport to her neighborhood I just kept noticing that there were no fences, anywhere.

There were no fences around homes, around schools or even around office buildings.

See I grew up in the suburbs of the southwest, El Paso and Scottsdale, where we had fences and walls made of stone and cement helping us to delineate, define and structure our neighborhoods. To me the notion of a fenceless neighborhood invoked a sense of chaos and fear.

I asked Allison at one point, how does all this work? Doesn’t everything just kind of seep into one another’s yard. **She said well yeah, sometimes, but that’s just life.**

Truth be told we human beings build all types of fences do we not. Not just literal fences or course but emotional, ideological, cultural, linguistic and spiritual. We seem to be pretty darn good at noticing and highlighting all the things that divide us, all of the barriers that stand between us, those things which set us apart from one another, that make us different or unique.

Sometimes we feel more comfortable making comparisons rather than finding commonalities. If you are like me it just seems easier to live in a clearly defined and fenced-in neighborhood rather than a community like Franklin Indiana **where you don’t know where my life ends and your life begins.**

Today we are celebrating Pentecost Sunday which is really a celebration of life in the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church.

At Pentecost each year we hear this weird story from the book of Acts of a single moment when the Holy Spirit breaks into a fragmented human community and binds them to one another in a new and sacred way.

The story places the disciples in the city of Jerusalem where they had been instructed by the Risen Jesus to remain following his ascension into Heaven. Jesus tells them to wait in Jerusalem for the coming the Holy Spirit. And so the disciples stay in the city, gathered together, this remnant of the Jesus movement, numbering about 120 people.

There is this sense in the text that prayerfully waiting for the Holy Spirit is part of the life of faith. Waiting for the Holy Spirit is a part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

What a challenge to us as 21st Century Christians who aren’t very good at waiting for anything, even like a bus or our Venti Iced Skinny Mocha, easy on the ice.

What God reveals to us in this story is that waiting is not a passive experience, but a time of prayerful preparation. In order for the disciples to be able to receive the new thing that God is about to do, they need to pray and wait.

See God is always ahead of us preparing new and wondrous revelations of truth and grace, but in order to fully receive the depths of this revelation we need some time to catch up with what God is already doing. We need some time to do the inner work needed to receive a new revelation of truth and to allow it to seep into our hearts and transform our lives.

And so as they wait in Jerusalem the disciples gather together in a small upper room during the Festival of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descends upon and tongues of fire rested on each of them.

Filled with this amazing gift they went out into the streets proclaiming the good news of God to all people speaking in tongues so that all could hear in their native language.

It must have been quite a scene because people gathered around amazed and bewildered by what they were witnessing. Folks were intrigued but also skeptical.

There's that great line in the story where some people in the crowd accuse the disciples of having a little bit too much new wine. It seems like every time I hear this story read aloud someone in the group giggles a little bit to themselves. Almost as if to say well of course someone accused the disciples of being drunk, there's always got to be at least one naysayer, there's always one cynic.

I love Peter's response to the naysayer too- we are not drunk its only 9 o'clock in the morning, almost like he's saying what kind of people do you think we are?

And in response to the skepticism and accusations Peter launches into this sermon quoting from the Prophet Joel saying: this the time that God promised when God would pour out the Holy Spirit upon all flesh, upon all people, that old folks would dream dreams, young folks would speak truth in love and that God's spirit would be poured out even upon the slaves, both men and women and that **all, all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.**

What a vision of God's beloved community Peter gives us here in this sermon and at the same time he models for us how we should interpret scripture. Peter uses this old text from the Hebrew Bible to give shape, meaning and understanding to current events.

He's saying remember that story from our history, what we are experiencing today is the same manifestation of that enduring truth that God's power is horizontal not vertical, that God's Spirit is made known through the least likely of people, and that the beloved community of God is bound together by the indiscriminate love of the Holy Spirit.

Let's take a few moments to unpack this scene and Peter's sermon in order to understand some of the subtle nuances that the writer of Acts is trying to communicate.

First, the language part, the speaking in tongues. As the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit it gives them this ability to speak, to communicate and convey the truth of the gospel to all who would hear it. Now the disciples were not a particularly well educated group of folks. They were from this rural part of the country called Galilee and you might recall that most of Jesus' inner circle were fishermen.

Galilee is a beautiful region but it was also not well known as a hot spot for culture and intellectualism. We see this reflected in the crowd when they say 'are not all these people from Galilee?' Implying that one could tell their place of origin based on their accent revealing to us that elitism and prejudice are not modern phenomenon but really are part of the human condition.

And yet, the Holy Spirit's manifestation among this rural, backwater, ragtag group of people enables **some** to overcome their preconceived notions and bias in order to hear the truth of God's grace for all people.

Peter in his sermon reinforces this vision of what God is doing in our world through the power of the Holy Spirit. He evokes this image of the Spirit being poured out on all people, and then he emphasizes four particular groups of people: old people, young people, male and female slaves. Now the societal structure of this time would have excluded every one of these types of people from having a place of importance at the table.

Old people, well they're vulnerable and weak. Young people, they're inexperienced and impulsive; slaves, they're not really a person but a commodity to be bought and sold at will.

These are not the inheritors of God's promise.

But Peter, this Galilean, accent and all, proclaims that God's Holy Spirit is being poured out on all people, even upon those people society would push to the margins.

He paints this picture of a new kind of community based upon the humble-life-giving love of Jesus made present through the Holy Spirit. He lifts up those who are down trodden and says no matter what language they speak or what their accent is, no matter if they are useless in your eyes or just merchandise to be traded, they are made in the image of the divine creator of all things, they have inherent sacred worth, **they are children of the most high God, and so are you.**

Peter's vision of the kingdom of God is a bit more like a neighborhood in Franklin Indiana. A place without the fences of age, race, education, politics, sexual identity. It is a community striving to love first and at all the times the way Jesus loves us all without judgment, without condition, and without prejudice.

Peter's vision of God's kingdom is a place where we listen to one another for the truth of God's indiscriminate love no matter how different the person speaking may be from us. Old people listen to young people, young people listen to old people, privileged people listen to oppressed people, and men listen to women. I think the world might look a little different if we really tried to listen to one another without any agenda.

Peter's vision of God's kingdom is what we strive for as the church and the truth is we sometimes are able to live into this vision and other times **we fall pretty short, like really short.**

We have witnessed the church, inspired by the Holy Spirit, speaking truth in love and opening up new possibilities of reconciliation, restoration, wholeness and grace. We have seen the church standing on the side of the oppressed, advocating for the poor, being in solidarity with the weak and reminding us of the sacred worth of all people.

But, we don't always get it right. Sometimes we get it dreadfully wrong. Sometimes we justify prejudice or erect fences to clearly define who's in and who's out

The truth is sometimes we live in the fullness of the Spirit and sometimes we are divided by sin.

There's a church in Denver called the House for All Sinners and Saints pastored by a Lutheran minister named Nadia Bolz Weber. She relays a story in her book *Pastrix* about their new comer gathering for folks who are interested in learning more about their community. The evening includes some stories and testimonies from lay members of the congregation. They often share of the way the congregation cares for one another, their worship life together, the way they pray for one another in their need. It is a 25 minute infomercial of all the wonderful things they do inspired by the Holy Spirit. Pastor Nadia describes her talk in this way

"I am always the last to speak at these events... [she say] This community will disappoint them. **It a matter of when, not if.** We will let them down or I'll say something stupid or hurt their feelings. I then invite them on this side of their inevitable disappointment to decide if they'll stick around after it happens. If they choose to leave when we don't meet their expectations, they won't get to see how the grace of God can come in and fill the holes left by our community's failure and that's just too beautiful and too real to miss. Welcome to House for All Sinners and Saints. We will disappoint you.'

The church is enlivened by the Holy Spirit and populated by human beings which means that at some point along the way we will disappoint you. There will be times when we are so in line with the Holy Spirit that we are able to listen to one another, to hear the truth of God's love speaking through the mouths of those who seem radically different from us, there will be times of transcendent sacred unity in bonds of love.

There will be other times as well, when someone does something or says something you disagree with, find offensive or you think is just plain wrong. Don't leave, stay in Jerusalem so to speak, wait and pray for the Holy Spirit to come to be with you, to be with us, to break open our hearts to new realms of love, mercy and grace.

And if you are like me and you feel uncertain about living in a fenceless neighborhood, look to the Holy Spirit for strength and courage to live without fear and if it gets to be too much for you to handle, don't worry you don't have to save yourself, because all who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

Thanks be to God. Amen.