

Go and Change the World

Acts 2:1-11

5/15/2016

We continue this week learning about the Holy Spirit which came upon Christ's followers as they were gathered for a Jewish Festival celebrating the early weeks of the harvest – Jews would have called it the Festival of Harvest or Festival of Weeks – the Greek name would have been Pentecost.

Pentecost is the third biggest celebration of the Christian year, but it runs far behind Christmas and Easter in popularity. In the case of the other two holidays, secular culture has embraced the religious feast, manufacturing its own cheap knock-offs. There's secular Christmas, with its blatant consumerism and vague ethic of doing something nice for someone you already love. As for secular Easter, it's nothing more than a rite of spring.

No one has trouble finding decorations and greeting cards for secular Christmas or secular Easter. Many of them feature the familiar mascots of the holidays, Santa and the Easter Bunny. Those symbolic figures have high name-recognition, even among people who've never darkened a church door.

Certain things you never, ever see in relation to Pentecost. Have you ever seen a rack of Pentecost cards in a drugstore? I did actually find an example of a **Pentecost card**, but you probably have to buy them online from a Christian retailer – I don't think Hallmark carries Pentecost cards.

Have you ever savored a special candy that commemorates the holiday? Have you ever baked Pentecost cookies?

Will the church ever issue a call to "Keep the Holy Spirit in Pentecost"? Not likely. It's not a problem. Nobody's trying to hijack the rights to this holiday. Pentecost is ours alone.

So, think about it: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15. At least 15 different regions are named in today's reading from Acts, which means at least 15 different languages, and likely even more than that are implied! Dozens of languages being used in sermons at the same time!

How many people were in that room when the Holy Spirit blew through in a blast of wind and tongues of fire? Acts 1:15 says "about 120 persons."

(And did that include the women? Because usually at this time these texts were written, numbers like this did not include women and children.) Were they all preaching in new languages?

And what's more, were all those languages heard by hearers who could understand them? All we know for sure is that from among all those who heard sermons about Jesus that day in Jerusalem, 3000 people were added to the original 120 believers.

That means, conservatively, that if all 120 were speaking in different languages, they each had a small congregation that resulted in at least 25 people coming to believe in Jesus.

And I have to say, that sounds about right. If I shut off this microphone, and move closer to you all, the best I could do is to be heard clearly by maybe the section of people I am facing. And for the rest of you within the sound of my voice, I would be hard pressed to say each word so clearly that all of you could hear me, let alone believe what I was saying.

Still, they each heard the gospel in their own language. Three thousand people came to believe, **new members totaling 3000** – just think about it!!!

This is stunning. What a big day! No wonder they stuck together. Not only did they hear their own language; presumably they could also translate for each other. And if they could translate, they could also share with each other, and if they shared with each other, they would have enough food to stay in Jerusalem for a lot longer than the typical Pentecost festival would last. And if they got together for the same good news and stayed together longer because they had enough to eat and places to stay, well, I realize this is speculation, but it sure explains a lot of troubles the early church had by the time Ananias and Sapphira came along and began to ruin everything by hiding their income and not giving freely to the work of the early church.

Let's not go that far today. For now, for at least for this day, this first day of church, things were perfect. Strangers became friends, food became a feast, and a pilgrimage became a home. And the Lord God did it all with a blast of wind, a touch of flame, and a sermon preached.

It lasted a good while – at least a few weeks anyway. It included the healing of a beggar, a stirring sermon by Peter on Solomon's porch, which was followed by his arrest, which did nothing to slow the growth of the

gathering. After that arrest, 5000 more were added to the church! It was all very, very good.

I think those first 8000 Christians would have stayed right there forever. And I would not have blamed them in the least.

But this is Luke's Gospel; remember that! And Luke's Jesus is not a "stay here and build an empire" Jesus. Luke's Jesus is a "Go, make disciples to the ends of the earth!" kind of Jesus. So we need to embrace an uncomfortable, inconvenient truth: the sudden explosion of the first church was never intended to take over Jerusalem and stay put. It was intended to make missionaries and disciples to then go and change the world.

Suddenly, I feel a little sorry for the first church. Even though they had everything they could ever need or want, there was no way for them to stay put and remain Christians. It was never in the cards – never in Luke's version of Jesus' story. And since we have it in our reading this morning, since it's been read *somewhere* almost every Pentecost Sunday for almost 2000 years, staying put has never been the Christian mission.

Christians go! That's what Jesus commissioned and commanded. Go, make, teach, baptize, *love*. Eat and drink, too, yes! And whenever you do, remember Jesus and Jesus will be there. But go, make, teach, baptize, *love*. In an old story from Genesis, all the descendants of Noah were living in one place for years after the flood. In fact, they became rather numerous. They decided to build a tall tower to heaven. Maybe they had forgotten that God wasn't going to flood the earth again. Maybe they wanted to reach the top of the rainbow. Maybe they thought God would like the huge structure reaching up in praise. But that's not how the story goes. The story says that God confused their speech into a babel, so they had to abandon the building project and scatter around the world.

It seems that if God created heaven and earth, no human structure would be all that important to God. Humans are important to God – all humans, from the whole world, in all their languages, cultures, and colors.

Stay and be the same? No. This is not what God is up to. Go, and tell the world that God loves it so much that he sent his only Son. I am blown away when I think about the infinite variety of people who are gathered into communities of faith. I get fired up when I observe what people moved by God's Spirit can accomplish. This is the church. God spoke through a

sometimes chaotic leader, Peter, to make sense and bring order to God's church. It was the word of the prophet Joel that directed Peter. The future of the church will be driven by Spirit-filled people who, renewed by the Word of God, dream big dreams, and see new possibilities. This will bring about new life and wholeness. In the meantime we keep on struggling to trust the Holy Spirit to make sense and bring order to this institution we experience as the church. It is Jesus' word that continues to call us to order, reform us, and then **send us out** with a holy fire in each one of us to bring about a new humanity. John 20:21 says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." May we follow Jesus command and go into all the world!

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After his resurrection, Christ promised an advocate, the Holy Spirit, who would dwell within each of his followers. Now that day has come and great wonders are seen and heard, all witnessing to the power of God and the grace of God's Son.

Acts 2:1-11

New Century Version:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a noise like a strong, blowing wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw something like flames of fire that were separated and stood over each person there. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they began to speak different languages by the power the Holy Spirit was giving them.

There were some religious Jews staying in Jerusalem who were from every country in the world. When they heard this noise, a crowd came together.

They were all surprised, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. They were completely amazed at this. They said, "Look! Aren't all these people that we hear speaking from Galilee? Then how is it possible that we each hear them in our own languages? We are from different places: Parthia, Media, Elam, Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, the areas of Libya near Cyrene, Rome (both Jews and those who had become Jews), Crete, and Arabia. But we hear them telling in our own languages about the great things God has done!"

May God add a blessing to the reading, hearing and understanding of this holy word.