

Sermon and Scripture for Sunday, May 24, 2015

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."

John 15:26-27:16:4b-15

[Jesus said:] "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

"I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts.

"Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

Let us pray...Amen.

This day of Pentecost marks what many call the 'Birthday of the Church'. Our reading from the book of Acts recounts how a gathering of God's faithful were together when the Holy Spirit descended upon them like tongues of fire. And at the sound of the rushing wind, people from all over Jerusalem came to see what all the hoopla was about.

Miraculously, each person heard the other people praising God in their own native language, even if the other people were speaking in another tongue. The Holy Spirit acted as some kind of universal translator, and allowed each person in attendance to be touched and to understand in their own language. Worship occurs all over the world in countless languages. And if you have ever experienced a worship service in another language, you know what I mean. Even if you don't understand the language, you understand the worship. Sometimes you *do* understand the language, but the *style* seems different.

I started out experiencing worship in Connecticut, in a Congregational Church that worshiped in a manner very similar to our worship: Preludes, calls to worship, opening prayers, hymns, scripture, sermon, communion once a month. But in Confirmation, in 9th grade, I was taken to several other churches to experience other styles of worship

After graduating from high school, our youth group went on a work camp experience in Biloxi Mississippi, where we assisted others in repairing and painting homes in and around Biloxi. While there, we were invited to participate in a Wednesday night worship service at a local Baptist church. There, I found the familiar structure I was used to, but no bulletin! There was the predictable flow of the service, from beginning to end, but those worshiping around me must have known what was coming next. It was a strange and somewhat disorienting feeling to be in the midst of a worship

service and not know what was coming next. The music was inspiring, the congregation handing us well-worn hymnals because they knew the hymns by heart, and we didn't...there was a powerful spirit present, and by the time our service, our 2 hour service, was through, I felt like I had been a part of something special. We were welcomed and accepted, and made to feel like we were part of the worship, not just observers.

While traveling in India, I was invited to many worship services. An Orthodox Indian service with families from Kerala, a service in Hindi, several services in English, but with a style and order of worship that was very foreign to me. In the midst of the differentness, was the Holy Spirit, making sure that everyone there understood the center and the focus of the worship: God. The Universal Translator made sure of that.

In Seminary, where there were over 10 different denominations represented in the worship schedule, I had an opportunity to be a part of a Pentecostal worship service led by a local pastor. In it, there was a balance between exuberant singing and exuberant preaching. The preacher would stop at a particularly intense place in his sermon, and have the congregation sing an even more intense hymn, and I could feel the power of the spirit building as the service went on. At one point, a young woman, who was singing had what appeared to be a seizure. Some of the older women gathered around her as she was overcome.

I felt completely out of my comfort zone! The intensity, the speaking in tongues, the preaching style were all designed for those who expected their worship to be like that, and for those who grew up in that tradition, they affirmed that we had had 'worship' that day.

What I take away from my various worship experiences is this: the Holy Spirit can be found in a multitude of worship styles and practices for a diverse group of Christians practicing their faith. No one style, no one

denomination has the Truth about worship, no one church has the ultimate way of praising God. But what every worshiping community has at its heart is compassion. Compassion for those who are in need. The Holy Spirit is present whenever a faithful gathering of God's children are together, when compassion drives the worship.

For those who practice different styles, the Spirit is in the tradition: the beautiful liturgy of a traditional catholic mass, the free-form exuberance of a Baptist praise meeting, the intensity of a Pentecostal worship, and yes, even in the comfort of our own Fairmount Community Church UCC worship.

The story of Pentecost reminds us, however, that no one of us has the right way, or the only way. In fact, we are all right in the eyes of the Holy Spirit, which helps us translate our different traditions and styles so that others will understand: the language of love, the language of compassion, and the language of praise is in fact, universal. And our worship styles are changeable too! Liturgical churches can stretch to accommodate a little more spontaneity, while free-form worshipers can sometimes learn to appreciate structure in the context of worship.

Mainline Protestant churches like our own struggle with both extremes, and in fact, may suffer a bit by resisting both the beauty of a fixed liturgy, and the intensity and exuberance of a free-form praise service. By being in the middle, our compromise may cause us to sometimes wonder, is the Holy Spirit among us or not?

If I have been preaching about a move to a more church universal, if I have been talking about ways to reunify churches that have split over the years over theology, over liturgy, over mission practices, then this story from Acts make me even more convinced that we need to begin investing in an

ecumenical movement that supports and invites the diversity of Christian practice to see how we can move forward into the future.

There are so many parallels that we can glean from our Acts passage this morning: from the presence of the Holy Spirit among such a diverse group of God's faithful, to the language of love being a universal language that all can understand. And what I feel most from this story is hope: hope for the church as it grows into the future: we have all the tools, all the gifts, all the materials necessary to be the church God calls us to be. Now we just have to do the discernment work, the listening work, and then the rebuilding of the church can begin: what is our purpose as a church? What is our purpose as a church in Camillus? What is our purpose as a Community Church, and as a United Church of Christ? How will we express our purpose to the wider community so that we can make a positive difference?

Pentecost was a new beginning in so many ways for the early church, and this year, may we let Pentecost be a new beginning for our faith community: filled with the Holy Spirit, empowered to go forth and grow our church into the 21st century. Amen.

I invite you now, to join me in a prayer for those who have given their lives in the service of our country. Let us pray:

Gracious and loving God,

We lift up our prayers to You for the men and women of our armed services who sacrificed their lives in the service of their country.

We offer thanks for their ultimate sacrifice, and in our gathering today, honor their memory and their efforts on our behalf. We acknowledge the debt we owe to those who faithfully served and lost their lives in the process

We pray for their families, the wives, husbands, children, parents, sisters and brothers, who have lost a loved one in this way. May Your presence be a comfort to them in their time of grief.

We pray for peace in the world, so that no more lives will be lost. May our remembrances this Memorial Day be of one accord, filled with respect, appreciation, honor and thanksgiving.

We lift up these prayers in the name of your risen son, Jesus. Amen.