

“Change of Heart”

Pentecost May 24, 2015

Acts 2:1-21,

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Prayer:

Open up our hearts now; prepare our minds and spirits to hear what you want us to hear so that we may be moved beyond selfish reasons, beyond anger or joy or sorrow and into your will. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Today we’re celebrating Pentecost. So Happy Pentecost everyone! Pentecost is a uniquely Christian holy day, more so than Easter and Christmas. But within the church we’re not sure what it means. Pentecost comes 50 days after Easter, those days following Easter are supposed to be a time of intense reflection on the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit as Jesus promised right before he ascended to heaven and left the disciples to scratch their heads and wonder what this is all about.

This gift, the Spirit, is poured out on the people. In the book of Joel, which Peter quotes, the Hebrew word for spirit is ruach...one of those great words that sounds like what it means. Like ooze, plop or splash. The Spirit (ruach) is wind, it is breath, it is life. It is God entering in life changing ways.

The Spirit is described by Christ as the Advocate, (one who speaks for you) so that we would not be left alone once Christ ascends and the reality and power of the resurrection continues because of this gift. Paul Tillich defines Pentecost as “God being present”. That is a powerful gift, to never be alone. It is one of the core identities of the Christian church: that we are never alone. Not one person, not one church, not one nation is disconnected from the rest. We are together because of who God is, because of what God does.

Pentecost is the unique demonstration of what that looks like. What we usually remember about Pentecost is the flames, the flames and the speaking in tongues.

There were flames but in fact there was no speaking in tongues! Speaking in tongues is called Glossolalia. Paul talks about it later in his epistles, he writes how people will not understand this strange speaking and interpretation will be needed. But this is different, this is Xenolalia: the gift (in this case given by the Holy Spirit) to speak in foreign, human languages. I think it’s important to remember that the apostles were speaking real, known

human languages, not some un-translatable mish mash of words. They were words that you and I speak.

There is no confusion, no one able to understand what is being said; everyone understands one another and they are united, not divided. That is the unique Pentecost experience.

The hearers in Jerusalem understood immediately what was being said. The miracle is not that they heard Peter speaking Greek or Aramaic but that Peter spoke a language he did not know! The apostles spoke in languages that were not theirs so that the crowds gathered nearby could understand “the story” – Christ’s story, the story passed on through the Advocate.

It isn’t about a strange language. I think I better focus for Pentecost is translation. That is the word that keeps coming back to me.

That seems to be God’s exceptional action taking place in this story. The actor in the story is the Spirit and what the Spirit does is translates for us. Taking words we don’t want to hear, words that scare us, taking empty, fearful spaces and putting meaning there and lending us language so we may understand.

Peter told the Story of Christ, and some believed and some didn’t. Some were moved and some walked on by. The church speaks today, for God, about God....and sometimes we are ignored or refuted. But we, the people of the church need to hear the things we don’t always want to hear, we need to hear the stories that scare us, and we need to hear from people who speak differently (words or expressions). Different can also be contexts, perspectives, and even form of speech. Call this “life language”, the words you speak or sing or put into pictures because of the life you’ve led.

Few minutes ago you heard Tanya speak so powerfully about Haiti. I had not done many mission trips outside the US before I came here. I confess I find learning foreign languages very difficult and it gives me bad flashbacks to middle school French class. On the trip we have to learn to speak without a shared language. Each trip is different but there are some things we always do. Like the hike to the Fort. This year only one brave soul went on the hike, William, with some local boys from the village so he wouldn’t be alone and so he wouldn’t get lost. It’s a difficult hike, straight up a mountain. They left before dawn so the way back down the mountain wouldn’t be done in the heat of the day. The rest of us spent time visiting neighbors and playing with the children. After a delicious dinner that evening we sat outside telling stories from the day. Suddenly things got quiet and I could tell there was a shift in the mood. William walked towards the group on the porch, he had been talking under the large mango trees with his friends from the hike and just learned none of them had eaten that day. All day. A sad but very common reality in Bayonnais. It is not unusual for a family to not eat two or three days a week. What could we do? What was

there to say? William's face said it all: crestfallen, confused, heart broken, angry. He went inside, to sort it all out in his mind I assumed.

He came back a few minutes later with a grilled cheese sandwich on a plate. He walked to the mango tree and had communion with his new friends. If it had been me.... For William, no words or discussion were necessary. He did what made sense to him, something he could understand, something I believe God put on his heart to do. No common language needed.

The Holy Spirit fills in the spaces when we don't have the words, when we know we need to say or do something – words of hope or comfort or challenge – anything that contributes to God's kingdom, God's work in the world. James Howell says: "In some profound way, what God is about cannot be captured by mere prose; our language is too "prosaic" for God. God is somehow higher, grander, deeper, requiring specialized language, poetic devices and meter, and not just spoken but also sung. So great is this God that every fiber of our being must be exploited in our attempts to express anything about such a God." (James Howell, servants, misfits and martyrs.)

Music and dance are such great examples of the Spirit.

"Music is a fair and lovely gift of God which has often wakened and moved me to the joy of preaching... I have no use for cranks who despise music, because it is a gift of God. Music drives away the devil...makes people forget all wrath, unchastity, arrogance and the like. Next after theology I give to music the highest place and the greatest honor. when natural music is sharpened and polished by art, then one begins to see with amazement the great and perfect wisdom of God in his wonderful work of music where one voice takes a simple part and around it sing three, four, or five other voices, leaping, springing round about, marvelously gracing the simple part, like a square dance in heaven with friendly bows, embracings, and a heart swinging of the partners. One who does not find this an inexpressible miracle of the Lord is truly a clod." Martin Luther (author of *A mighty fortress is our God*)

There is a difference between words that are real (like lyrics of a song) and the gibberish that isn't worth our time sorting out (like most political rhetoric) My experience tells me that the way to know this is through community. Through the body of Christ gathered together. This happens in bible study, in Starbucks, over dinner and over communion. There are a few instances in the bible where God speaks to an individual when no one else is around, but they are always sent to go somewhere and share the story. But I'm not holding my breath that God is going to send the Spirit upon me while I'm quietly meditating in the desert (probably because I never meditate in the desert). My money is on places like this – where there are meals, and story telling and singing and people who speak different life languages than me, life languages far removed from mine. But I will understand and

you will understand me because the Spirit is in this place. And the Spirit is on the other side of these walls and across town and across the ocean and across the villages to the gathered few, huddled together after a long walk telling their stories.

There is the Spirit is and thus there we are too.