

The First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, NC  
Roland P. Perdue, III, Interim Pastor  
Pentecost Sunday, May 27, 2012

**Mrs. Alma Goodnight is Enjoying a Pleasant Recuperation in the Lovely, Modern Walker Mountain Community Hospital while She is Sorely Missed by Her Loved Ones at Home.**

Acts 2: 1-39

Many of us grew up in towns with local newspapers featuring “gossip columns.” Well, maybe not “many of us,” but at least some of us are “mature” enough to remember those days back in the day! The “gossip columns” were mostly innocent bits and pieces of news ranging from new births and whose sons and daughters were going to which college or employed here or there. The “gossip” helped in small ways to blend a town into a community of sorts. You knew one another and you knew something vaguely interesting about one another. At least you had something to gossip about.

The author Lee Smith writes of such a “gossip column” in one of her novels. Ms. Smith lets the author, Joline B. Newhouse, tell us about her column.

“Peace be with you from Mrs. Joline B. Newhouse” is how I sign my columns... And my column means everything to folks around here. Salt Lick community is where we live... There are seventeen families in Salt Lick – twenty, if you count those there down by Five Mile Bridge. I put what they do in the paper. Anybody gets married, I write it. That goes for born, divorced, dies, celebrates a golden wedding anniversary, has a baby shower, visits relatives in Ohio, you name it. But these mere facts are not what’s most important, to my mind.

- Lee Smith, *Cakewalk*, pp. 1-2

Joline B. Newhouse’s column is called “Between the Lines.”

**In many ways the majority of the New Testament is a collection of “gossip columns”** written by Paul, Luke, and others. Paul’s letters were circulated from one gathering of Christians to another, read hungrily for bits of news and read “between the lines” to understand the new faith spreading across their world. Luke’s letter to Theophilus is a “gossip column” of what went on after Easter. And just like Joline B. Newhouse’s column, St. Luke’s column “means everything to folks around here.”

It is not the repeating of “mere facts” which is important to either Ms. Newhouse or to Dr. Luke. Joline B. Newhouse continues:

I write for instance: “Mrs. Alma Goodnight is enjoying a pleasant recuperation in the lovely, modern Walker Mountain Community Hospital while she is sorely missed by her loved ones at home. Get well soon, Alma!” I do not write that Alma Goodnight is in the hospital because her husband hit her up the side with a rake and left a straight line of bloody little holes going from her waist to her armpit after she yelled at him, which Lord knows she did all the time, once too often. I don’t write about how Eben Goodnight is all torn up now about what he did, missing work and worrying, or how Alma liked it so much in the hospital that nobody knows if they’ll ever get her to go home or not. Because there is a mystery, and I am not a detective by a long shot...

My column would not be a paragraph if the news was all I told. But it isn't. What I tell is what's important...

- Ibid, p.

How right that sounds. **"What I tell is what's important."** I love that thought. Joline knows there is mystery in life. She knows more than she tells, but she tells what's important as does any good gossip. And Luke's "gossip column" invites us to "read between the lines" and to see what's important in the metaphors of the "rushing great wind," the "tongues of flame," and "other languages." Luke knows there is mystery in human affairs, a mystery in the love affair God is having with us, a mystery defying our logic, a mystery blowing into our ordered lives, engulfing our compassion, and reaching out to us with tongues of warming fire in the midst of our confusion, apparent insignificance and empowering us with God's purposes.

On that Day of Pentecost, and on this Day of Pentecost, there in that place where they were all together, and here in this place where we are together, there in the streets of Jerusalem, and here in the streets of Charlotte, the vital energy of God, the creative source and comforting presence, the challenging pull to new risks and the renewing power of the ancient traditions – indeed, all that we mean when we say "Holy Spirit" – all of it is poured out from God's reservoir of love upon the church, upon us, by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. **And that is what's important!**

If we see what is clearly there "between the lines," it means God's Spirit is **everywhere**. We are a universal community, with local communal gatherings, and we personally belong. God has gifted us with the Spirit of Christ in order for us to know that wherever we are, God is with us. Luke tells us what's important to tell. And when he tells us that people were in Jerusalem from Mesopotamia, Libya, Egypt, Italy, and so on, he is listing the entire known world at the time of his writing. People from over the world are there, and God's Spirit moves over them as the Spirit moved over the face of the waters in the evolutionary events of creation. God's Spirit is everywhere binding the world into one. That's what's important. For the Spirit is everywhere.

And when our "young catch visions" of the way the world can be and our "old dream" of the encouraging and satisfying dreams they used to have, and when our sons and daughters and those with whom we work and love tell of a future wrapped up in love for all humankind, then the world will know we are Christians by our love for one another. **For what's also important is that God's Spirit is everywhere and the message of Christ's love is for everybody!**

Indeed, what stunned and amazed people on that Day of Pentecost was not simply the sound of a mighty wind, nor reports of tongues like flames of fire. What amazed person on the street was that they heard the good news in their own language, their own vernacular with their own accents! And they heard not only words, but the language of relationships, the melodies of mercy and the gestures of kinship and tolerance.

Not only is the Spirit everywhere, but the Spirit of Christ is also for everyone everywhere. And that too is the "between the lines" significance of people being from all over the world in Jerusalem of Pentecost and hearing the message of God's amazing love.

The rock band U2 shares that message with those willing to hear them "gossip" in the lyrics of their songs, and in melody, attitude and obvious compassion for the forgotten, avoided and despised. For

instance in the song “Yahweh” from the *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* album, U2 addressed God by the proper Jewish name for God in a simple prayer to a God who hears, responds and relates to us all everywhere. Listen to these lyrics trusting Yahweh to clean up and forgive our brokenness:

Yahweh, Yahweh,  
Take these shoes  
Click-clacking down some dead end street.  
Take these shoes  
And make them fit.  
Take this shirt  
Polyester white trash made in nowhere.  
Take this shirt and make it clean, clean.  
Take this soul  
Stranded in some skin and bones.  
Take this soul  
And make it sing.

- As told by Greg Garrett, *We Get to Carry Each Other: The Gospel According to U2*, p. 27f

The God whose Spirit is everywhere for everyone takes our brokenness, our uncleanness, and our lostness and transforms us into sisters and brothers of Christ and children of God.

**Joline B. Newhouse and Luke write delightful “gossip columns” because, at heart, they are just big old gossips.** And would that we all were. Like so much of our English language we have corrupted the old English word “gossip.” It is literally a combination two words: “god” and “sib;” “god” meaning, of course, “God,” and “sib” meaning “kinship.” The purpose of gossip was to bring men and women together into kinship with God and one another. The “gossip” in the medieval church was the sponsor of someone being baptized. The “gossip” mentored and told the newly baptized brother or sister the good news of gospel that we are made whole, clean and fit in Christ and therefore we are all “siblings,” brothers and sisters of Christ and children of God.

If we were really “gossips,” busily telling the Good News that God’s love is everywhere and for everyone, we would have no time to erect walls which divide, to worry about another’s opinion or our “take” on this or that political issue. And maybe then we could find time to be at peace with one another as we pursued compassion and justice for all our siblings everywhere.

Yes, lord, make us clean. And

Take this soul  
Stranded in some skin and bones.  
Take this soul  
And make it sing.

Amen.

