

When the Spirit Moves
Acts 2:1-21
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Today is one of my favorite days in the Christian year. And this is about more than how amazing the sanctuary looks all dressed in red (but it does look amazing, doesn't it!?!?).

However, more than the beauty of this place, today is one of my favorite days because in this story we watch as the early followers of Jesus finally get empowered to get up and start doing something...to go and start making a difference.

It's not that they hadn't done anything before. Although largely they had spent their time with Jesus as supporting actors in his story on their good days, and nothing more than extras hanging around the background of his story on their less engaged days. And, in the stories told to us about the weeks after the resurrection, the disciples were still trying to figure out what would come next, who they would be, how this Jesus event would impact them for the long haul.

Then Pentecost came and suddenly the way became much more clear and the boldness with which they lived became...well...they became bold.

But, before we go there, let's start for a moment back at Pentecost. After all, it is important to remember that this is not *first* a Christian celebration. No, if we are paying attention to the story we will notice that Luke writes, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place."¹ Pentecost was already an established event – it was "the ancient Jewish pilgrimage festival, the Festival of Weeks, or Shavuot (pronounced "sha-voo-OAT"), celebrated 50 days after Passover. For the ancient Israelites, this festival was an explicitly inclusive harvest

¹ Acts 2:1, NRSV.

celebration ([Deut 16:11](#); [Lev 23:16](#)), and over time, it also came to mark the reception of the Torah at Mount Sinai.”²

So, the people who were gathered together for Pentecost were Jewish people, ready to celebrate a Jewish festival. And Luke tells us that there were people from “every nation”³ who were there in Jerusalem.

And that day, among those who were or would become followers of Jesus, Pentecost gained new meaning and additional significance. Pentecost, with the coming of the Holy Spirit in new and undeniable ways, came to be understood as the birthday of the church. It became the day that set the early Christians on course to become a bold and welcoming body.

“This week’s passage points toward a portrait of the church as a dynamic community of people following Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry out God’s mission of healing, liberation, and joy for the sake of the world. This community is...diverse, inclusive, and egalitarian.”⁴

You might remember, if you’ve been here the last few weeks, that we have already been reading ahead in Acts. We have been looking at some stories about who the early Christians became. And those stories give us a glimpse of what the presence and power of the Holy Spirit meant for the early church. Stories like that which we find in Acts 10 that reminded us that soon the Jesus movement would open itself up to Gentiles alongside Jews. Stories like the one we read last week from later in Acts 2 which reminded us that soon the focus on community and equity would lead early Christians into a structure where all were taken care of even when it meant one gave up possessions in order to support another.

² <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/5/15/salts-lectionary-commentary-on-pentecost>

³ Acts 2:5, NRSV.

⁴ <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/5/15/salts-lectionary-commentary-on-pentecost>

And then there is today's passage in which the Spirit comes in such a noticeable way that Peter stands up and interprets this experience calling on the voice of the prophet Joel who said, "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."⁵ Luke casts the church as a diverse, prophetic community of bridge-builders, visionaries, and dreamers, male and female, slave and free.⁶

And yet too often we have lost that aspect of church. Too often we have found our comfortable places and lost our prophetic edge. Too often we have hunkered down with those like ourselves and built walls instead of bridges. Too often we have focused on how we've always done things rather than listening to the call of the Spirit to go into new places and to catch a new vision. Too often we've set rules about who can and who can't, who's in and who's out, rather than remembering that when the Spirit moved among the early Christians it caused them to open wider the circle of inclusion.

So, what does Pentecost mean for us today? Before we answer that, perhaps there is another connection that we might want to notice. Often stories in scripture refer back to earlier stories or connect back to earlier stories. Sometimes this is in using similar images and metaphors. Sometimes this is in bringing a story full circle back to the beginning. Sometimes we see this when an earlier action is set right with a later event.

The story of Pentecost with people from many nations understanding what was being said in their own languages even though it was only the Galileans who were speaking should bring to mind the story of the tower of Babel from early in Genesis. In that story the people were striving

⁵ Acts 2:17-18, NRSV.

⁶ <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/5/15/salts-lectionary-commentary-on-pentecost>

to be like God and the writer of Genesis explains that they were given different languages in order to separate them so that they could not continue their quest. And yet here we are with the Holy Spirit moving in such a way that people who once were separated by language could understand each other. Here is yet another example of the ways in which the movement of the Spirit brought people together and welcomed people in – from people of different lands, to various genders, to different racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds, to slave and free – in the moving of the Spirit in Acts, all of these divisions are ended.

So, again, what does Pentecost mean for us today? Perhaps the first thing for us to notice is that Pentecost reminds us that when the Spirit is in the house, our differences are less pronounced and our traditional structures of power and privilege must give way to a God created order where the last shall be first and a little child shall lead us.

And we must also remember that Pentecost is a prophetic event – not just on that day, but Pentecost, what we consider the birthday of the church, asks those of us who walk in the ways of Jesus and work to live out of the love of God to continue to be prophetic.

We must not lose that.

And when we talk about prophesy, we must remember that prophesy is not future predicting, as some would say, but rather it is truth telling and it is meaning making.⁷ So, when we are called to speak and act in prophetic ways, we are called to speak God's truth and to create a more meaningful world.

This story, that we hear each year on this occasion, with its sounds like rushing winds and its flickering flames, with its barrier breaking as languages no longer become a dividing factor and its inclusion as the prophet Joel is called upon again to remind the people that everyone is

⁷ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2837)

part of God's vision – this story isn't just a look back in history or an early church goal as they strove to be their best selves.

No, this story is and can be so much more to us. For we are those who are following in the ways of Jesus. We are those who are continuing to figure out what will come next and who we will be. We are those who are wondering how this faith of ours will impact us and the world for the long haul. We are those who still need the Spirit to blow in such ways that we can't help but go and start making a difference.

If we pay attention, the Spirit is among us. It is in our midst. It is knocking down barriers and will continue to do so no matter how hard we work to build them. It is leveling the playing field so that the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the gay and the straight, the black and the white, the stranger and the friend, the native and the immigrant, the male and female...so that all of us can participate in lives of meaning and love even when some try to limit that participation. The Spirit is among us and more than that it is within us.

Whenever the Spirit moves, it doesn't move alone or for its own sake. Rather the Spirit intends to move us. It moves us until we can no longer deny it...it moves us until we become part of the movement of those who make a difference in this world, a difference rooted in God's love.

Pay attention. The Spirit is moving. And when you notice it, you just might find yourself speaking truth even when doing so is scary. You just might find yourself befriending the enemy because you know that ultimately we are all one. You just might find yourself welcoming one you previous kept out because you know what it means to be welcome. You just might find yourself going out into this world to help create a world of love, of inclusion, of equality, of joy...the world that God intended. Amen.