

“The Spirit Poured Out”
Acts 2:1-21
Sunday, May 15, 2016
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

I remember fondly a conference Roy and I once attended at Biola University. It was delightfully academic; very fun and educational, to listen to the big brains discuss deep issues of the faith. But, as always happens at these events, when it came time for Q. & A., the red-faced, true-believers inevitably came out of the woodwork, giving long speeches about their pet topics; needing to be reminded that we were all waiting for them to address an actual question to the experts on the panel. After all, none of us had given up our Fridays to come hear Joe Schmoe rant about his favorite rantings. We were there to hear the featured lecturers.

Fred Craddock is a well-known, beloved author and preacher. He tells a somewhat uncomfortable story about a lecture he was giving: He was on the west coast speaking at a seminary. Just before the first lecture, one of the students stood up and said, “Before you speak, I need to know if you are Pentecostal.” The room grew silent. Craddock says he looked around for the Dean of the seminary! He was nowhere to be found.

The student continued with his quiz right in front of everybody. Craddock was taken aback, and so he said, “Do you mean do I belong to the Pentecostal Church?” He said, “No, I mean are you Pentecostal?” Craddock said, “Are you asking me if I am charismatic?” The student said, “I am asking you if you are Pentecostal.” Craddock said, “Do you want to know if I speak in tongues?” He said, “I want to know if you are Pentecostal.” Craddock said, “I don't know what your question is.” The student said, “Obviously, you are not Pentecostal.” He left.

I think Craddock and the student were suffering from a language issue. They were

throwing words at each other, but no messages were being received. They did not understand each other, they did not have a shared language with which to understand each other.

When the Spirit was poured out “on all flesh,” as the prophet Joel foretold, it was poured out on all flesh. And an ability to speak the good news in many languages was God’s first gift to the Church.

I. Tires.

This story from the Book of Acts is set at the time of the Jewish feast of Weeks, which also became known as Pentecost in the Jewish as well as the Christian tradition. The festival celebrates the harvest and also the giving of the Torah; in particular, it celebrates the giving of the Ten Commandments. There is a connection in Luke’s telling of the story between the Exodus and Pentecost. The Exodus is, for the Jews, their birth as the chosen people of God. Pentecost is, for Christians, their birth as Christ’s church.

At the birth of the Church, God makes sure the message is heard by all.

It is often preached that the crowds in Jerusalem were pilgrims. It is also often preached that the Pentecost story is a reversal of the tower of Babel story. You will recall that in Genesis chapter 11, humanity gets all full of itself and tries to build a tower to heaven. In short, to become equal with God. But God foils their plans by confusing their languages and scattering them across the land. Now they have different languages; they have become separate nations. They are no longer united against God’s plans for them.

There’s a story about a confused court case, in which a judge was presiding over a case in a small, rural county:

“The defendant was charged with drunk driving and trying to assault the police officer who arrested him. To convict the defendant on the assault on an officer charge, the District

Attorney had to prove that the defendant knew the person he was assaulting was a police officer. And the easiest way to do that is to show that the officer was wearing a police uniform, and therefore the defendant knew that this was a police officer.

“So the D. A. asked the officer on the witness stand, ‘And how were you attired when you pulled the defendant over?’

“The witness looked at him blankly. It was clear he didn't know what the D. A. meant by ‘attired.’ Everyone saw this but the D. A.

“‘Would you repeat the question, please?’

“In a slightly irritated voice the D. A. said, ‘And how were you attired when you pulled the defendant over?’

“The witness still was puzzled. ‘Say that again,’ he pleaded.

“ ‘How were you attired when you pulled the defendant over?’ barked the D. A.

“[The judge says] you could suddenly see the light bulb come on in the officer's head, and he proudly proclaimed, ‘I was traveling on standard issue radial tires!’

“This officer needed an interpreter even within the English language!

“That's [the point]. We all need our own personal interpreter, full time, 24/7. So much of what we hear, even within the English language, we don't understand. And nowhere is that truth more evident than with people who are new to the church.” (Leonard Sweet).

When God poured out the Spirit on that day of Pentecost, on that day the Church was born, God gave his people the mission, the power, and the freedom to share his message the world over, in whatever language the context demands.

II. Nerds.

I am intrigued by Margaret P. Aymer's interpretation of the Pentecost story. She is a leader in New Testament Studies at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta Georgia. Aymer argues that the crowd was made up of immigrants, not temporary pilgrims. These folks would all have known Greek, the language of the Roman military. But they also spoke multiple languages, the languages of their home countries. Kind of like L. A.

Aymer further argues that, when the disciples spoke to them in their native languages, rather than in the language of the occupying army of Rome, the disciples performed a political act of liberation. On the day of Pentecost, God did not undo Babel by uniting everyone under one language; on the day of Pentecost, God established the Christian faith as having a message for all the world, for every language and for every nation. We are not united under one language or one culture or one way of doing things. We are freed by the Holy Spirit to translate Jesus' message of love into every language; to share God's servant-kingdom in every cultural setting; to proclaim the gospel in as many different ways as there are people hungry to hear it.

I've mentioned my brother, Glenn, before. A few years ago he started a ministry he calls "Nerd Church." Nerd Church is for – you guessed it! – nerds! Speaking nerd language, Glenn reaches out to a group of young people who love zombies and computer games and Final Fantasy and coming in full costume to role-playing game nights. People who love Star Wars and Star Trek, Hobbits and Harry Potter. People who may not know Christ, but who long for a place to belong. By speaking the language of nerds, Glenn engages in friendship evangelism. In Pentecost fashion, he crosses cultural barriers to love people where they are, to gently bring Christ's love to them. Of course, it helps that Glenn is a full-fledged, card-carrying nerd himself...

I'm not saying we should pretend to be something we're not in order to bring people to Christ. I am saying that we should be open to using different languages, as God gives us utterance. It may be that God calls us to use different languages, or different approaches, to reach out to different folks. Young people, old people, Pentecostals, nerds -- you name it. God fills us with the Holy Spirit, as a church, to speak in many other languages, as the Spirit gives us the ability.

Peter's explanation of the events of Pentecost is that this is the end of the present age and the beginning of the age to come. This is the beginning of the age of God's kingdom. The tongues as of fire and the ability to speak many languages – these are signs that God's kingdom will soon be realized. God will bring salvation to all his people – nerds and Pentecostals alike.

Peter is preaching the treasonous overthrow of Rome by the kingdom of God. Aymer notes: “The Joel passage was written at a time of occupation; as part of the same prophecy [that Peter quotes], Joel wrote, ‘I will remove the northern army far from you, and drive it into a parched and desolate land’ (Joel 2:20).”

This speaking in other languages can be dangerous, even treasonous. Treason is usually met with severe consequences.

Closing

At the same time, speaking in the languages of the Spirit can have an effortless quality to it, if we cooperate with the Spirit. Sometimes we try too hard. Or at least I know I do. I don't know about you. I think I have to work, work, work if I'm going to be a good Christian, be a good citizen, claim the power of the Holy Spirit in my life, discover God's specific truth for me, today.

There's a lovely story about a shark and a whale that gets me out of that works righteousness mode. Works righteousness never gets me where I want to be no matter how hard I try.

“The shark and the whale...were swimming in the sea when the shark swam up to the whale to engage in conversation. As they swam along, the shark said to the whale, ‘You are so much older than I, and wiser too. Could you tell me where the ocean is?’ The whale responded, ‘The ocean is what you are in now.’ The shark would not believe it. ‘Come on, tell me where the ocean is so I may find it!’ The whale repeated, ‘The ocean is here, now; you are in it.’ Unbelieving, the shark swam away searching for the ocean.’

“The moral of the story is this: don't spend too much time looking for God because the Spirit of God is here in the now of your life, dwelling within you, within me, within this community. And that truth is nurtured in prayer.” (Susan M. Fleenor).

May you be aware of God's presence, of God's Holy Spirit poured out on you. May you nurture this awareness through the daily practice of prayer.

And may the Spirit give you a wild freedom to reach out to new people, speak new languages, and invite a new friend to church.

Amen.