

June 8, 2014
Northwood United Church
Acts 2: 1-21; John 20: 19-23

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be aligned with your wondrous love for us, our God, our leader, our light. Amen.

Ok, so, big Sunday for us here in the United Church – we’ve got Pentecost, which is where we share the story of the Holy Spirit being received, it’s also really the start of the Christian church as we sort of understand it. And, Tuesday marks the 89th anniversary of the United Church of Canada! So, we have cake after the service to celebrate all of those wonderful things.

Pentecost is what we call the 8th Sunday after Easter, the start of a new season in the church as I mentioned earlier and we most often look to the Acts 2 reading which makes sense – it happens at the same time of year, the Jewish feast of weeks. But this morning Brenda also read the “Johannine Pentecost” – the story of the Holy Spirit being imparted in John, which comes during Jesus’ first post-resurrection appearance to a collection of his followers. We are reading both on purpose, even though they tell a bit of a different story, they are both informative for the identity and work of a discipleship community.

But, we will start in Acts. So, in those days it was Pentecost, the Jewish tradition held seven weeks after Passover where the law or Torah was given at Mount Sinai – we also might know it as Shavu’ot. So there are a whole bunch of folks around from all over the place. And it says,
“suddenly, without warning, from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind,
gale force”.

I don’t know about you, but I read that I am instantly brought back to Genesis 1,
“in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”
And even to Genesis 2,
“then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the
breath of life; and the man became a living being.”

Back to Acts,

“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.”

Ahhh, speaking in tongues. There are many ways to interpret this. For folks in the Pentecostal tradition, speaking in tongues – as some of you may have witnessed on tv or even in person – is the physical manifestation of a person’s having received the holy spirit. It is distinct from conversion where believers are empowered for witness. Others will argue that it was a onetime deal, limited to the Apostolic period. Necessary for the churches inauguration but not beyond. In my understanding, and as translated here in the New Standard Revised Version, it was the work of the Spirit breaking down language barriers. Not that they were speaking foreign sounds, but allowing all who were gathered from all around to be able to hear and understand the Gospel message without the barrier of not speaking the same language. In verses 6 and 7 we hear,

“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?’”

That is, not from these different places whose languages they are speaking, as they then list. One of the coolest parts about this passage is that these folks were not united in one language – one universal language. Pentecost is not the reversal of God diversifying the languages at the tower of Babel. It is Gods promise that in and through our diversity, the Spirit works to lead us forward in understanding.

There are likely 20 or 30 different understandings right here in this room about the concept of speaking in tongues. The good news about that is that we don’t need to decide on anything. Thankfully, we have a faith where we can trust in the not knowing. What we *can* move forward in is the trust of the Pentecost experience. Trust in a God that honors the multitude of human languages and cultures with no prerequisite for uniformity. Trust in the Spirit – in its unbridled, unrestricted fullness – the Spirits determination to break down barriers.

Now, I don’t feel like I can go forward without going backwards again. What comes next in our reading is Peters explanation of this experience, which is longer than the event itself. He cites Joel chapter 3 verses 1 through 5 here in Acts as an interpretation of what has just happened. By doing that he bridges what is before with what comes after. Now, what you should understand here is that by doing this, he is giving it authority – Joels prophecy is the authoritative interpretation in that cultural context. The ancient audience would know those lines in Joel. This is just like in Luke 4 when Jesus begins his ministry he reads from Isaiah in the temple,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lords favor.”

Jesus cannot explain his ministry without it. Here, Peter cannot explain Pentecost without Joel. Neither Jesus nor the church can be understood without Israel’s story and Israel’s hope. By making these connections, our writer is demonstrating that the early church is faithful to the traditions of Moses – again, this original or early audience would get this relationship. It would be critical even. This thread of signs and symbols of Gods presence that echoes all through the Old Testament and now are developing in the new weave the two together: we have connection between Jesus, Stephen, Moses, Philip, Paul and Barnabas. Signs and wonders accompany the ministries of the leaders of Gods community. Continuity!

Another piece of continuity is this listing of Nations that happens here in Acts. Now, I know, any time there is any listing of anything in a Scripture reading, the way we read it, aloud or in our heads, and the way we hear it Sunday morning is like the Peanuts adults in the cartoons – remember that? Wah wah, wah wah. But here, we actually have another reference back. This listing of nations acts like an update to the listing of nations back in Genesis 10, of Noahs descendants after the flood. Only this one is broader, indicating to the Jerusalem church that their mission is a universal one.

The mission of the church, that is the point of the book of Acts right? Like a church instruction manual. Just a quick glimpse back to our John reading today, we touched on it a couple of

weeks ago when I spoke about us being called to serve the world through Jesus words, “as the Father has sent me so I send you.” And how does he then equip them? The Holy Spirit. Here again, we have the disciples getting ready to live out the mission without Jesus and again, are equipped with the Holy Spirit. You are not alone.

I’ve also heard that Acts could be named Acts of the Holy Spirit because it chronicles over and over the work of the Spirit in and through the members of the early church.

Really though, as Peter describes it, Acts is all about this radical new community that was prophesied by Joel and has come to be realized as what we know as the church. The radical thing is the level of inclusivity that they describe, “every kind of people”, “sons”, “daughters”, “young”, “old”, “slaves”. Membership in this crazy inclusive community we have come to call the Christian church is open to everyone. Biblically. It doesn’t describe every Christian church does it? Past the end of our lectionary reading, we have Peter saying,

“Change your life, turn to God...receive the Holy Spirit – the promise is targeted to you and your children, but also to ALL who are far away.”

I guess that is where the language part comes in handy, eh?

Now, just so you know, this would be a *crazy* concept to those who were first hearing it. And we can sit here on our progressive liberal pew-chairs and say, well of course, we are the United Church of Canada! Behold! The gates of holiness are open wide here, haven’t you heard us sing about that? But! Yes, there is a but, and it is a big one, I want to ask you, are you holding on to an old idea of God and an old idea about church community that doesn’t fit into the Acts description? What are your old ideas about God? Our amazing church that we celebrate today has an awful history of not honoring diversity. How about our Residential schools legacy?

There are times when our culture, other churches, and our own church exclude people because of race, culture, custom, behavior, from the love of God.

BUT (there it is again), Peter speaks that this amazing wind – this receiving of the Spirit – is the realization of the words spoken by the prophet Joel of a God who is radically inclusive. Even women will prophesy – the young, the old, slaves and free.

Yes, the United Church of Canada are a pretty inclusive bunch. I think, denominationally, we get this better than some, but some of us, within the United Church are still hung up on an old idea of God. Of a hellfire and brimstone, angry, exclusive God. What this passage is asking us to do is put down our old ideas about God. Just like the folks who were there in person who had a concept of God, we are being asked, challenged, to put down the God of barriers, the God that is out there or up there, away, separate, and believe, or at least be willing to believe, in the God that lives in here.

This week I heard someone describe the difference between belief and faith. He said that faith has an element of knowing. So, let’s think, an atheist believes in the non-existence of God, which, actually, very few people truly are. Many folks are agnostic. Ag = without, nostic = knowledge. Meaning that they believe there is something, but haven’t had the spiritual experience of knowing. Faith. It’s the difference between bowling for the first time, and subsequent times. Before you bowl that ball for the very first time, you are going on belief that it will get down to the end, based on seeing other people and having them teach you and tell you. Once you have that experience, and you know what will happen, you have faith. Not that it will always turn out just the way you want, but that it’ll get down there anyway.

Last week I talked about finding God in the seeking of God. The sermon is on the website if you weren’t here or need a refresher. What we celebrate today is the offering that God has made to each of us to dwell within us, to enliven us, to guide us. And it is that God – not the far away

grey beard in the sky, but the one so invested in us that through the Spirit offers to dwell in us, that we are to seek. To begin to believe. Or at least, be willing to begin to believe. And it is on that willingness we can move forward in getting to know that God. That radically inclusive God of love, God of new life, allowing those old ideas of God to fall away, making room to explore a God whose wind fills *all of us* and allowing that God to turn our belief into faith from the inside out.

May it be so for each one of us.

Amen.