

Pentecost: A Spirited Community Becomes the Church!

Acts 2: 1-21 and Psalm 104: 24-34, 35b

Pentecost began as a high and holy day in ancient Judaism. It's where we get the name for one of Christianity's high and holy days. It was a day of a new experience for the early followers of Jesus and definitely new to the witnesses. It was in those first few years when the followers of Jesus were actually called 'the people of the Way;' the people of the Way trying to both follow Jesus' teaching and make sense of what Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection might mean for them and for the world. This was a movement that started scared, behind locked doors, in small groups, with secret symbols; and yet on this day...

On this day that group of scared, quiet, locked away people were given a gift which probably didn't feel like a gift at the time. It was of being very loud and having people they didn't know from all around the world understand what they were saying. Imagine; imagine if your only world was scary. Maybe you don't need to imagine, maybe you only need to remember. Remember a time when you wanted to lock yourself away or you felt the world wanted you to be very, very quiet. "Oh be yourself," they say. But they usually mean be your quietest, most conformist self. And then one day, you find yourself speaking so loudly about who you are and what you believe that everyone assumes you are drunk.

I always think of this day as a wonderful day. Wouldn't it have been amazing to speak and have people understand me even if they didn't know English. Holy moly though it would have been scary if I had been told that the only thing I *couldn't* do, as a person of the Way, was tell anyone. You do remember what happened to Jesus right? He wasn't just arrested and locked away for the rest of his life; he was arrested, publicly tortured, and then hung to die, publicly. Even the resurrection story was absolutely terrifying. Is our God so awesome that death means nothing? How frightening, awesome and awful at the same time.

The people of the Way did not begin to call themselves *Christians* for a few more years. One of the things they were wrestling with was the fact that everybody seemed to be changed by the stories of the ministry of Jesus. Not just the people who spoke Hebrew, not just the people who had grown up going to synagogue, not just the people with brown skin, not just the men. *Everybody's* life seemed different after hearing about Jesus.

Even Saul, who had been known as Saul his whole life so far, got angry when he heard about Jesus. Later on he will become joyful and amazing preacher, but the first instinct of Paul is to be very angry and to persecute these people because they were saying that, in the eyes of God, absolutely everyone is beloved, is worthy and a sacred vessel for the Holy Spirit. Everyone? Are you kidding me? Do you know how much work that makes things?

I have spent the last 6 or 7 days amongst clergy and lay leaders of this United Church of ours. We had a few things in common; we were all members of the same denomination and we all actually *like* meetings. We call ourselves ‘Church Nerds,’ so you may also call us that. We had in common that we were the kind of people who take out manuals, who read Robert’s Rules of Order to find out who can make an amendment to the amendment to the amendment, and we all love Jesus. And boy, even in that group of really similar people, could we disagree (hence the amendment to the amendment to the amendment)! We are not the first group of followers of Jesus who proclaimed we loved each other while totally disagreeing about the important things. This has been happening since the history, of well, humans.

I can imagine God on that day of Creation. I can imagine big hands going; “You are all from me. You have that in common.” And then I kind of see God’s eyes roll a little bit. I don’t know what colour God’s eyes are, but oh do they roll because every once in a while, like every 2nd second, somebody (and I am one of them sometimes) says, “well, you can’t mean that you love *them*, you can’t mean that “love your enemies,” means *all* my enemies.”

And those early followers of Jesus were classic examples of meaning *all* of them! They would get together and have meals with *anyone*. We are talking about tax collectors, collaborators, and women – gross! And then this message, this crazy, weird message is proclaimed: You are a child of the beloved God and God wants you to live like it. Well it that word got spread around. Again, they kept trying to be quiet and safe and then someone would shout out one day in the middle of the marketplace, in the middle of the street, in the ears of their mother-in-law: You are a child of God; you are called to transform this world.

Then they started doing even weirder things! They took the money that they made at their workplace and gave it to people. I am serious, just gave it. No talk about a 1.2% interest rate, none of this contract stuff. They just started giving it to people.

And they did this everywhere. They did this in towns where there was what was called a patronage system. Patronage system meant, “it’s not what you know it’s who you know.” Everybody would find someone who was more important than them and make sure they owed them one. Basically, a pyramid scheme. It was who you knew and who your connections were. And that was not only how you stayed safe financially, it was how you might get your next job. If this is sounding familiar, it’s because we are still living in that world. It is still very much about whom you know, whose phone number you have, whose email you can send to and not get put in their spam folder.

Well, these followers of Jesus weren't having any of it. They would get together in social situations and you would go in and ask, "who's in charge?" and they would say: Jesus. And you would say, "oh yeah, I know *spiritually* he is in charge, but really, who's in charge?" Followers of Jesus kept flipping things upside down.

Now am I saying that the early Christians were perfect and we have got to emulate them? They weren't perfect. They fought all the time. It's kind of embarrassing, but the letters of the New Testament are actually one of the members of the church getting mad at the other members of the church for everything. Talk about hanging out your dirty laundry. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "I hear you have these new ministers who are telling you that you need to wash your hands, and you have to let so-and-so eat first, and you need to only let the Jewish people read the Bible. Didn't I tell you, you were free? Didn't I say when I was with you; you are a beloved child of God?"

One-third of the New Testament is that: Paul saying, "Hi, I've heard a rumour. I've heard a rumor that you are not sure what women should wear when they are preaching." And Paul is great on this, because Paul says, "I just feel uncomfortable when women don't cover their hair, but you know, this isn't from God, it's just my comfort level." And so people go on to debate what women should wear in church, missing the first point. That the fight wasn't whether women should speak in church, it was about what they should wear when they speak in church. Paul didn't even debate the fact that women were speaking in church. All are children of God. (oh how endless are the debates of whom and how we worship).

So, how is it that we can remain united? How is it that we can trust that it is *one* Spirit that is giving us all these gifts? That's where faith comes in. I can prove to you that Jesus lived and I can prove to you, and I stood there just last week, that Paul preached in the face of a whole bunch of Athenians who thought he was crazy. I can prove that the early disciples debated endlessly this issue about who was in and who was out; that over and over they kept coming, just like the United Church leaders did last week, to the answer that we are *all* included. And *that* means we need to begin to listen to *everyone* because everyone has something to teach us about God and God's activity in the world.

I cannot gift you with faith, because faith is another one of those gifts of the spirit. And if you are thinking you get it once and then you get to keep it the rest of your life – sorry, it's not like that. Faith is kind of like an emotion, it comes and it goes, but in those moments when you have faith that you are a beloved child of God (or perhaps that moment when someone tells you a story about their life in faith and you realize you believe them) are the moments of the Spirit. And I pray you have enough of them to hold onto to follow through all the ups and downs of Christians debating and the status quo changing. Please hold on to those moments, and may they connect you with others who believe what I believe: You are a beloved child of God.

Blessed Pentecost to us all. Amen