

Series: Joy in the Journey
Today: The Work of the Spirit
Text: Acts 2:1-4;14-16;37-41

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs
Sunday, May 23, 2010 (Pentecost)
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America is intentionally ecumenical. There is a section in our Book of Order entitled “The Church and its Unity” which speaks of our desire to honor all religious traditions which “*profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and commit themselves to live in fellowship under his rule.*”(Book of Order G.4.0101) As a result, we are a haven for people of other traditions who have found previous experiences in the churches where they were members to be restrictive, and who want to be part of a church which is more inclusive.

Being that kind of a church does lead to some strange requests, however. I remember receiving a request from a man who was raised a Baptist. He wrote me a letter stating that he would like to become part of the church. He said that his faith had taken on a renewed priority in his life, and he wanted to demonstrate his renewed commitment by getting baptized again. Having been baptized by immersion, he wanted to be immersed again, but considering the request, the language of his letter made me laugh. He wrote: “*I accepted Christ as my savior when I was a teen ager, and I was baptized. Now I would like to be **reimbursed.***” (The word he meant to use was reimmersed, but since he was changing churches, I found his choice of words telling).

We do not rebaptize someone who has been previously baptized in the PCUSA. However, with Christians of other traditions, we do believe there is a second baptism. It is the moment in our lives when we own for ourselves what our parents affirmed for us as children, or

when we allow ourselves to be embraced by the grace of God in a way we have never experienced it before. We call this the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and our text this morning is where we gain our understanding of what that means.

Pentecost is actually a Jewish holiday associated with the harvest. On Passover, the first omer of barley was offered to God in gratitude for the giving of the Law to Moses. Seven weeks later two loaves of bread were offered in thanksgiving for the harvest of the crops that had been planted fifty days earlier.

Jews came to Jerusalem from all over the surrounding countryside to celebrate this very traditional festival. The city was like Times Square on New Year's Eve. People from all over the world were there, and the mood was festive. Maybe that is why some people thought the disciples were drunk when they received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible tells us there were about 120 followers of Jesus who had gathered together to celebrate this Jewish festival. They were a disheartened lot. It had been seven weeks since they had seen their leader. They had pinned their spiritual hopes and their political ambitions on him. Even though they had experienced him risen from the dead, they were not at all sure about the future of their movement.

The Bible says that "*suddenly there came a sound like the rush of a mighty wind.*" It doesn't say that the wind blew, but there was this noise like the sound a tornado makes, that filled the room where they had gathered. Then came the symbol that is always associated with the presence of God: fire. Divided tongues like fire appeared over their heads, and they found themselves speaking in languages that were not their own.

The reaction of the religious people of the day was to accuse them of having too much to drink. Good, upstanding, church-going people just didn't behave that way. However, Peter gets

up and tells them that they couldn't be drunk. It was too early in the morning. Peter, who had been so frightened of being associated with Jesus that he denied him, suddenly finds the courage to speak about the one whom he loved and whom he had deserted in his hour of need. Peter finds his voice, and he never loses it again.

If you have never found the voice that God wants to give you, Pentecost is your special day. God longs to use every single one of us here as communicators of God's grace. So this morning I want to suggest to you that based on this text, the work of the Spirit is three fold: 1) It empowers us to speak the truth of God's love in a language that others can understand; 2) It empowers us to witness to what we know; and 3) It empowers us to invite others to choose a new direction for their lives.

Speaking in Language Others Can Understand

The first thing we notice about the work of the Spirit on Pentecost is that the disciples were given the power to speak in languages that they did not know; languages that were not familiar to them. The Bible says that there were people from all over the known world in Jerusalem for Pentecost, and somehow these disciples were able to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ in languages their listeners could understand. Something happened that day that reversed the story of Babel in Genesis 11. Just as God confused language so that people could not communicate, God distributed languages to the disciples so that they could communicate the good news of Jesus.

Speaking the truth of God in a language people can understand is the work of the Holy Spirit. My Spanish is very poor, but when I lead worship at Resurrection Chapel, I do my best to speak it, and the people there are very forgiving because they know I am doing my best to speak their language and tell them the truth of God in their native tongue. However, the work of the

spirit is not limited to speaking foreign language. It happens anytime we make an effort to share the grace of God with others and we choose to meet them on their terms.

Several years ago I was privileged to officiate at the wedding of a couple who had been referred to me by members of this church. The bride's mother had died when she was a teenager, and she was estranged from her father. When it came time to plan her wedding, she had no one to help her, and she didn't know where to turn. Some members of our church, who were her neighbors, stepped forward to help her.

The bride had not been raised in the church, but she had a longing to be married in one. She wanted her marriage to be "*blessed by God.*" Our church members asked me if I would help her, and after I gave her my wife's line about marriages not being made in heaven but need to be assembled here on earth; how marriages come in kits, and we have to assemble them; I told them I would be honored. Our church members became her surrogate parents. They helped her plan the wedding, but more important, they demonstrated to her the love of God that she had not seen from others because of the tragedy that life had brought her way.

The woman and her new husband never joined our church. I am not sure if they ever joined any church, but that is not the important thing. They both have had a taste of God's grace in language that was meaningful to them because two members of our church were willing to take the risk and introduce them to the body of Christ which offered them love and grace in a tangible way. This is the power of the Holy Spirit at work: God speaking through us in language people can understand in order to demonstrate Christ's love.

Teach What We Know

Our text also reminds us that we are to witness to what we know, and what we know is the story of God's redemptive love told in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. Peter

did not have a new testament; so when he stood to speak, he interpreted the experience of people with a story from the prophet Joel. He related the ancient word to the experience of his listeners.

Our work is to know the story of scripture well enough that we can share it with others. The work of the Holy Spirit is helping us to share those stories with others so that they can make the connection between what is happening in their lives and what the Bible teaches about the redemptive love of God.

I received a call about a month ago from a woman who had read one of my sermons on the internet. She was filled with a horrible sense of guilt for something she had done. *“I cannot believe that God forgives me. What do you have to say to someone like me?” she asked.*

I told her that I believed in a God of infinite mercy who offers us forgiveness, not judgment, and that there was nothing she had done which could ever separate her from the love of God. *“How do you know that?” she asked. “I have disappointed everyone who loves me. I have disappointed myself. If I had the courage, I would take my own life. How can you believe that God can forgive me?”*

I told her that I believed it because there is a story in the Bible about someone like her who had disappointed everyone who had loved him. He ran away to a big city where he spent his inheritance in some pretty raucous living. It was so bad that he felt like dying, but he decided to go home and confess his sins to his father and ask to be treated like one of the hired help just so he could be near his family. Do you recognize the story I was telling her? It is the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15). I told her that when the father saw him coming, he ran to him and welcomed him home. I told her that this was a story Jesus told to teach us that there is nothing we can do that can separate us from the love of God, our Heavenly Father, and that because of that story, I believed there was forgiveness in the heart of God for her. I told her where she could

find the story in the bible, and I prayed with her that God would reveal how much she was loved. And I invited her to come to our church if she wanted to learn more.

Now I have never met this woman face to face, but she called the other day to tell me she had read the story over and over again since our call. It had prompted her to go to her family and asked for their forgiveness. She said they were just glad I came home. I told her that I was glad she went home, too, and that I hoped one day she would come home to God's family where we could love her, too.

We share what we know, and what we know is the story of God's love in the scriptures of the Old and New Testament. It is up to us to know those stories well enough to tell them, and it is the work of the spirit to convict the listener of the truth in them.

Invite Others to Choose a New Direction

The final lesson I would like us to learn from this text this. Peter's message on the day of Pentecost was an invitation to accept the grace of God and move in a new direction. When they asked him what they must do to, his advice was direct: *"Repent and be baptized."* The work of the Spirit is to help people want to move in a new direction. Our responsibility is to offer them the opportunity to do what it is the Spirit has convicted them to do.

In his commentary on Acts, Bruce Larson shares a letter from a father to his child which describes such an invitation. The father writes: *"I sincerely wish you will have the experience of thinking up a new idea, planning it, organizing it, following it to completion, and having it be magnificently successful. I also hope you will go through the same process and have something bomb out. I wish you could know how it feels to run with all your heart and lose, horribly.... I wish you could find something worthwhile that you deem worthy of the best of your life. I hope you become frustrated and challenged enough to begin to push back the barriers of your*

personal limitations. I hope you make a stupid mistake and get caught red handed, and are big enough to say those magic words 'I was wrong.' I wish for you a magnificent obsession that will give you reason for living and purpose and direction in life."

The beauty of that letter is in its acknowledgement of what I think God wants for all of us: that we succeed in what makes us happy in life and that we acknowledge that there will be times when we will fail. However, failure is not fatal, if we confess it, ask for forgiveness and move in a new direction.

Peter didn't sugar coat the message. He said, *Repent and be baptized*. Become a new creature in Christ and seek to do what pleases Christ and not the culture which is always trying to woo us into destructive behavior. Repent and be baptized. Change. This is the work of the Spirit.

Conclusion

Today is the birthday of the church. It is the day when we celebrate the coming of God's Spirit on the first disciples giving them the power to become the living body of Christ in the world. If we trust the work of the spirit, we will find ourselves seeking ways to share the good news of Jesus in language other people can understand; teaching them what we know; and inviting them into a transformative relationship with the risen Christ.

Come, Holy Spirit! Help your church to be the church for such a time as this.