

“Notes to Self about Pentecost”

June 4, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania
Pentecost Sunday, Year A

Text: “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. . .”

Acts 2:1-4ff; NRSV



Image Credit: He Qi (Chinese, 1950 --), “Holy Spirit Coming,” 1998; Found in Art & Theology, (<https://artandtheology.org/2016/05/15/pentecost-art-from-asia/>)

The Chinese artist, He Qi, pictures the “Holy Spirit coming” to the disciples pictured outside, as if already on the street proclaiming the mighty acts of God as the Spirit, represented as red flames on their heads, give them utterance. The Church, empowered by the Holy Spirit is meant to be outside, on the street.

Let me begin with a quote from a writer, born and raised in Pittsburgh, Annie Dillard; she is the author of “*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*” and “*Teaching a Stone to Talk.*” She is a marvelous

writer and I encourage her to you for splendid reading. She writes the following in talking about the people in Church:

*"On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."*ⁱ

Danielle Shroyer elsewhere says this in speaking of the importance of Pentecost for the Church:

*"Why is Pentecost important? Why is the resurrection story not completed until Acts 2? Because we are not equipped to be who God wants us to be in this new world moving toward new creation until the Spirit comes whooshing through the room. Pentecost is the day that makes the future of the church possible. Without Pentecost, we'd just be people who tell Jesus' story. With Pentecost, we're people who live into Jesus' story."*ⁱⁱ

And all of this begins with disciples waiting, who are then called out.

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

So, we have this story of Pentecost, read from the pages of Acts 2 . . . Let me unpack it with a series of notes on it:

Note: The disciples are upstairs with the doors locked shut and tight. Why? Because they were afraid; they were told ten days earlier at the Ascension of Jesus into heaven, "Go into Jerusalem and wait." So that is what they were doing; nevertheless they kept the doors locked. They were waiting for the promise Jesus said would come and they were all together in one place . . . And you don't know, I guess, what you don't know . . . But then all of a sudden –

Whoosh! And Wow!

And what they are compelled to do is to go out! Unlock the door! Realizing that there is a whole world out there – and by the way there is a festival in Jerusalem so there are a lot of people in town – from all over the place . . . Those people don't know what is going on upstairs. The story of Pentecost in Acts 2 is not about what is going on upstairs, it is meant to be about what is brought outside! That's why I like He Qi's painting here because they are already outside.

When it comes to how we "do" church inside these walls, there is a world out there that has no knowledge of what it is we do in here. This is why the Spirit gave the gift to speak about God's mighty acts in other tongues (in the language of the people outside, on the street) – languages the first disciples did not know.

How does the church get beyond itself? Inside the church it is all jargon and code, but out there? . . . Out there we need a different language in order to be heard.

A lot of folks suspect our language anymore. After a while we start to sound like the parents in the animated cartoon version of Peanuts: "*Wahwahwah . . . wah, waahhh.*" That is why the disciples were forced out of the room, unlocking the doors, to get outside . . . Lowly Galileans – that's the amazing thing! – The disciples were Galileans – not a good thing, by the way (Galileans were not held in high regard.) . . . But all these other people heard, in their own languages, these words about the mighty acts of God! Medes, Persians, Parthians, Greeks, Romans, Elamites, Cretans, Arabs, Phrygians – it goes on and on; the point of the place names is to underscore that the whole known world was hearing it! This Pentecostal movement of the Spirit is BIG!

The news they have to share is so important that it needs to be unlocked and spread out as far as possible. God is no respecter of persons – in the sense that he gives the message to

"Galileans" – "Aren't these guys, Galileans, for Pete's sake? How is it we hear in our own languages what they are saying?" Yet in another way, God is a complete respecter of persons because everybody is able to hear what the Spirit is saying through them that day.

Note: What happens here in Acts 2 is the unmaking of the Tower of Babel story; really the inverse of that story from Genesisⁱⁱⁱ in which the people try to reach up to God by building a tower into the sky; and the higher the tower seemed to grow into the sky, the more muddy and indecipherable their speech became; away from the ground, away from the street, the more confused things became! Finally, nobody could understand anybody! It was a towering mess of babble in Babel! But unlike the Genesis story, here in Acts 2, the disciples are way up high, in the upper room, away from the street; but the closer they got to the street, the more they could be understood by others for all the languages that were pouring out of them! Greater was the sharing among people because they could hear the mighty acts of God being spoken clearly.

Note: the day itself had meaning because it came directly from the immediacy of their experience. It wasn't necessarily anything borrowed, or passed down; it was lived out, fresh, and it was coming from them to someone else. Think of the stories you have told in your life that have some "juice" about them, some kind of excitement, and some kind of connection in the telling of them, it is because you have participated in them directly! Nothing else does as much for impact as immediacy!

Funny story: One of the perks that Elaine receives in her work for the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust are tickets to concerts, plays and events in Pittsburgh at the various art organizations around town. On Friday, we were given tickets to go see Manfred Honeck conducting the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra in Gustav Mahler's *"Resurrection"* accompanied by the Mendelssohn Choir! Wonderful and astounding music and singing! Our seats were very close to the Heinz Hall stage. As we applauded their efforts at the conclusion of the

performance, I couldn't help noticing the third violinist from the right; she was practically standing in front of us. This woman had the goofiest scowl on her face during the applause! I couldn't tell whether she was mad, embarrassed, looking at all of us with contempt – her look was not nice . . . But the audience was giving her – and all of them – a standing ovation! So I turned to friends who had joined us for the evening and starting mocking her look: *"Get a load of her! 3rd violin to the right, she looks mad at us or something . . ."* We let it go, said good-bye to our friends and made our way up the avenue to the elevator of our parking garage. As we stepped in to the elevator, in stepped two lovely young ladies dressed in shorts and tee-shirts. Perky and smiling – they looked like arts festival attendees, you know? So Elaine made for conversation, saying, *"Are you folks here in the city taking in the arts festival?"* "No," one of them replies, *"We were at the concert."* "Ohh," we both remarked, *"Did you enjoy it?"* "We . . . Played in it." And in an instant I made the connection: that's her! That's the 3rd violinist from the right! . . . But I have to tell you, she had a lovely smile, quite beautiful and attractive . . . And I found myself thinking in that moment, "where was this look ten minutes ago when we saw her on stage?!" The fact that she had made the quick change from her orchestra formal black concert clothes to denim shorts and a tee shirt disguised for me the fact that she had her instrument in a case under her arm. As I said to her – *"You're the 3rd violinist from the right!"* Her friend, pointed to herself, mouthing the words, *"And I am the harpist!"*

I tell you that story only to underscore the impact of the immediacy of the moment; the fact that it was a lived experience for us, makes the story all that much more meaningful and exciting in the retelling of it! So, of course, we called our friends as we drove home – *"You will never guess what just happened in the parking garage!"* The story had veracity, truthfulness, and energy, and clarity because it was ours, it was lived by us.

Note: And the message of Pentecost is that the story we tell is not so much borrowed from somebody else, it is lived by us. How is it that God is at work in you? How has the Spirit of God been made alive in you? How have you seen the work of God, the mighty acts of God, happen in your life in a way that you are compelled to tell somebody else? What are the "God things" that happen to you in a very personal way that can only be expressed by you in telling others what has happened? And the things that happen don't have to be big – "crash-helmet" big in Annie Dillard's terms, but she is on to something. We're far too placid, any of us about the faith we profess; because the faith we profess is nothing short of a recreation of everything; a new creation in which death no longer counts – that is big! Again, in Dillard's words, it is TNT!

So where is the good news in the middle of that? Even when you have takeaways or take-downs that diminish you day-to-day in your various circumstances in life; how is God at work even in these things in a powerful way that will change the world? In times like these we have to strap on the crash helmet for the waking God is pushing us outside of ourselves and our cozy worlds; our "used-to-it" places of what we know to learn about and live into something new that God is doing.

Think about the stories you are telling about your faith. And if you are not telling stories about your faith, what stories are you telling? . . . Gossip? What stories are you telling?

You know, the Church is growing by leaps and bounds in Africa and Asia – He Qi, the Chinese painter is part of that; the same Church is declining in Europe and America. There is a freshness and vitality to the story of the gospel where it is meeting with various difficult circumstances. The faith and presence of the Spirit; the faith of people who are invested in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the Spirit who is our comforter and advocate somehow has a whole lot more currency and energy when there's a danger close at hand. There is a vitality there partly because of the urgency of the moment.

Maybe we should be praying for that – more of the urgency – not necessarily the problems – the urgency – that can help us get out there beyond ourselves.

Note: Pentecost is for you in order that you can become meaningful for someone else! Pentecost becomes meaningful for that someone else because of your experience . . . The gift of God is always meant to be shared: like this bread and wine on the Lord's Table; Jesus' gift of himself for those he loves – and those he loves through us.

Note: there are always critics in any crowd! Some thought these Galileans were drunks . . . There will always be scoffers – even when we do and say what God has poured into our hearts and minds to say. But we are always called to be good stewards of God's story in our stories – that is what it means to be the church; whose birthday we celebrate and remember this morning.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

ⁱ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Harper & Row, 1982; page 40.

ⁱⁱ Elizabeth Mangham Lott, *Of Dreams and Visions*,
http://www.scabc.org/Sermons/OfDreamsAndVisions_PcostB.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 11:1-9