

Serve and Bless
Pentecost Sunday
May 15, 2016
Jill R. Russell

Texts: Acts 2.1-21;
Romans 8.14-17;
John 14.8-17, 25-27

There is a reason we invite our students to make their profession of faith on Pentecost. This was the turning point for the followers of Jesus. This was the day when they shook off the fear and confusion that surrounded the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. On that day they finally stepped up and stepped out in faith. Sam, Anelise, Caleb, Evelyn, and Aaron -- that is what you have done here today and you invite us to go there with you.

I want to reflect with you and with all of us about what these texts have to say to us as we step up and step out. I mentioned the disciples' fear and confusion. Last week when we read the story of Jesus' ascension, Gordon joked with us about the disciples stalling again in their favorite role of the clueless disciples who just don't get it. Gordon reflected on fear and security with us. "Our security as Christians is simply and profoundly this: the Spirit of the Risen Christ is with us. That's it - that's all - and according to this story, that is everything."¹

The day of Pentecost is **when** the Spirit of the Risen Christ is poured out on God's people: "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability."² Imagine with me what it might have been like to be present on that day. As you engage your imagination, think with me in terms of metaphor as well. There are people gathered for worship from all over the known world to celebrate the gift of the law. That is what the Jewish observance of Pentecost is about and that is why they were gathered. They are worshipping in the common

¹ Gordon Wiersma from his sermon on May 8, 2016 available on the Hope Church website:
http://hopechurchca.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/050816_GSW.pdf

² Acts 2. 4, NRSV

language when all of a sudden something strange and unsettling breaks loose. They feel something like the rush of a wind, see visions of flames, and hear people start talking in languages they have never learned so that suddenly these people who were working hard to track worship in a language not their own all of a sudden hear stories about God in the language of their heart. There are a lot of connections to be made as we experience this story on the level of metaphor. All of the ways that God is eager for us to translate the good news to touch people's hearts where they live.

But I want to direct our attention to the next part of the story as holding a key for us in our efforts to step up and out in faith. It comes to us as a question. When you encounter something that feels strange and unsettling will you move first toward curiosity and wonder (ala vs. 12) or will you sneer and accuse (as in vs. 13)?

Verse 12: "All were amazed and perplexed saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'" When you bump up against something that feels completely foreign to your way of thinking or challenges your assumptions about life will you bring a spirit of wonderment and curiosity to investigate with the full expectation that you may very well discover that the Spirit of the Risen Christ is in the middle of this thing that you know nothing about? OR Verse 13: "But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'" That's the choice! Will you bring you a cynical spirit that accuses and completely writes off those you do not understand?

Folks, do not underestimate how completely counter-cultural this invitation from our text today truly is! Social media, the culture at large, even the culture within the church sometimes sees cynicism and accusation as the more sophisticated choice. You will be applauded to be the first one to call someone out and put someone in their place. If I believe that the Spirit of the Risen Christ is being poured out on all flesh, then I had better stop myself from believing that I have some corner on the truth and instead better get curious about whether the Holy Spirit might just be in the center of this thing I do not understand.

In fact Peter embodies for us what it looks like to step up when he takes on the role of interpreter in Vs. 14 “But, Peter standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them...these are not drunk as you suppose....this is what was spoken through the prophet!” On Monday night, we had a meeting of ministry chairs and consistory. The Elder leading us in devotions shared some excerpts from one of his favorite novels and invited us to be on the lookout for connections between the thoughts that run through our mind and the experiences that make up our days and some of the deeper meaning that God is looking to show us.

There is a call to us on this Pentecost day to stand up and raise your voice as Peter did to help people make the connections even between (maybe especially between) the strange and unsettling experiences of life and the work of God’s Spirit in the world. I don’t mean to suggest to our students that to do this you need to become a preacher or pastor. As if some professions were somehow better suited to this role of interpreter. No – we need artists and poets and scientists, we need parents and teachers and police officers all of whom stand up and raise their voice to make these connections between the experiences of our life and the work of God’s Spirit pulling us toward the ways of God. Be an interpreter.

The gospel of John and the book of Romans speak to another angle on this Pentecost invitation to step up and out in faith. Jesus makes a promise to send to us an Advocate to be with us forever. Paul talks about the courage we can find when we let the Spirit of God lead us: “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption...so that the very Spirit of God bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God!”³

I can tell from the statements of faith that our students wrote that they understand that this incredible promise and gift of the Spirit does not mean that we will somehow magically escape the suffering of life. There is no bubble of protection. Jesus didn’t escape that suffering and neither will we. The invitation Paul makes at the end of our passage from Romans is to let

³ Romans 8.15-16, NRSV

the suffering that is inevitable lead us toward the glory of God: “in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”⁴

When I gathered with my clergy group this past Tuesday they knew that I was going back to a funeral that afternoon. So the Benedictine nun who convenes us shared a reading from a Jewish Prayer book called *the Gates of Prayer*. It talks about the way the Psalms give us permission to express freely and experience fully the pain of suffering. Stepping up in faith does not mean pretending that the disappointments and failures and losses of life don't matter. They do. Stepping up in faith asks a question of us here as before: what will we do with our suffering? Will we let it consume us and make us bitter? Or will we let our suffering turn us toward God's glory? The reading Carm shared with us from the *Gates of Prayer* included this line: “And, in truth, grief is a great teacher, when it sends us back to serve and bless the living.”⁵

That is what Jesus did with his resurrected life before he ascended to the heavens and it is what he calls us to when his Spirit was poured out.

It is the invitation of this table:

to be interpreters of God's power and
to let any suffering that comes our way be our teacher
sending us back into life to serve and bless.

As we come to table, let this be a moment for us to profess again our faith. To say “Yes, truly with all my heart” – to step up and step out – to serve and to bless.

Amen.

⁴ Romans 8.17, NRSV

⁵ The *Gates of Prayer* is a prayer book affirmed by the Conference of American Rabbis
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gates_of_Prayer