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Sermon 23 May 2021: A Familiar Voice

Good morning church! Today is Pentecost Sunday, a day when we celebrate the “Birthday” of the church. So let’s start again – Happy Birthday Church! Today is Pentecost Sunday!

“Pentecost” comes 50 days—7 weeks-- after Easter—Pentecost means fiftieth day. It’s hard to believe that it’s been 7 weeks since we celebrated Easter. Our second Easter in lockdown due to this pandemic that has kept us from being together for far too long – but things are beginning to change and we are certainly excited about the future.

Pentecost has its origin in the Jewish “Feast of Weeks,” -- 50 days after the second day of Passover, when the Apostles -- like many other Jews from all over the world -- were in Jerusalem, having made a pilgrimage there. In the book we call the Acts of the Apostles, Luke describes what happened in Jerusalem when the Apostles were there some time after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

Now, our scripture this morning begins with Acts Chapter 2, but let’s look at the events that have led us up to where we begin today. Now, let’s remember that Luke and Acts are sort of like one book in 2 parts, written by Luke and as you may recall, Luke’s Gospel tells us all about Christ’s life and ministry. Luke’s narrative is structured in a very deliberate and logical way, there’s lots of detail – specific times and places and historical references – and he even tells the reader in the very first verse – “I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophillus so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed” Luke’s primary concern is to inform the reader who Jesus of Nazareth was – and now who he is as the suffering, crucified savior and the risen exalted Lord. He takes us from the birth of Christ (even before the birth of Christ) through his life and ministry and ends the Gospel with the Ascension.

Then, we see here, right at the start of Acts, Luke begins with an introduction and summary of the things he wrote about in the Gospel of Luke - He explains to Theophilus, that in the first book, he wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day he was taken up to heaven – only after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. Acts begins where the Gospel of Luke ended, with the ascension, and continues the story of what happens to Jesus’ followers and the movement that became Christianity.

The Book of Acts begins, just as the gospel of Luke began, by addressing someone known as Theophilus. Now just very quickly, I want to mention Theophilus—lots of people, including John Wesley, have put forth theories about who he is—a Roman official, a member of the Alexandrian elite (John Wesley thought that), Paul’s lawyer, or a Jewish priest—but the truth is, nobody really knows who Theophilus was.

But what we do know is that the word “Theophilus” means “friend of God,” or “beloved by God”—either way, that’s you – that’s me, that’s any reader who fits that description.

And what I want to say about that is—it’s really helpful and important to understand the historical situation of scripture as well as we can—who wrote what, and to whom, and why, and what the historical situation was at the time—but the truth of scripture doesn’t lie solely in the historical situation—way back there. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, scripture speaks to each of us, in 2021, in our own situations, in our own language—much like the Apostles spoke to the crowd at Pentecost in their own language—that’s what the Holy Spirit DOES – but I’m getting ahead of myself.

Let's look at today's scripture.

The apostles have prayed and cast lots to replace Judas with Matthias– so there are again 12 of them and they're all together in one place, all waiting for the fulfillment of the promise of the Father – the promise from Jesus before his ascension that although John baptized with water, they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. Luke tells us that suddenly there's a sound – and he describes it “like the rush of a violent wind” and perhaps Luke was referring back to Genesis chapter 1 verse two when the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a mighty wind swept over the face of the waters. Then in chapter 2, God breathes into Adam and he becomes a living being. You've probably heard of all of these related words: ruach (roo'-akh) – the word for wind and breath and spirit in the Old Test. And the word pneuma (pnyoo'-mah) in the new test, the noun for breath and spirit and there's the related verb, pneó (pneh'-o) which is used here that means to blow or to breathe. And what is blown or breathed here in our passage of scripture fills the house where they were sitting.

Luke goes on to describe tongues like fire that rested on each of them and they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the spirit gave them ability. The word Luke uses here is glóssa (gloce-sah') which means – the tongue, or a language or a nation, a people who speak the same language. Now remember those three separate meanings that the word glóssa has – the actual tongue, the language and the people of a nation – as we move forward in the story because Luke is using this word to foreshadow what happens next.

Now this passage doesn't refer to the speaking in tongues that's described in 1 Corinthians 14, but as the crowd pointed out, these were Galileans using their own tongue to speak the language of the hearers who came from many different tribes or nations. And there's all three of those meanings of the word glóssa – The disciples use their physical tongues to speak the languages of people from many nations. This is why Luke is such a master of languages – because he does things like this.

Last week, Pastor Steve and I took a little break and we spent a long weekend in Glasgow. We stayed at a lovely hotel in the National Piping Centre. It was located right in the heart of the Glasgow shopping centre – just a stone's throw from the Buchanan Galleries and St Enoch's Square. Right in the heart of the city. And as you can imagine, especially after living in peaceful Largs for a couple of years, the sounds of Glasgow, of the big city were large and loud, almost deafening. Our hotel room looked out over Hope street and even with the windows closed up tight, we could still hear the sounds of traffic and sirens and people and of the exciting hustle and bustle of the city. And as we meandered the cobblestone streets of the shopping centre, just soaking in the sights and sounds, we could hear the beautiful diversity of languages and accents – a guy over there on his cell phone speaking Italian, two sisters from India giggling at their little brother, a young couple having lunch together at the café, speaking a language I've never heard before - people from all over the globe, living and thriving in the best city in the world. It's one of the things I love the most about Glasgow – the wonderful diversity of her people. People truly do make Glasgow.

And although the diversity of languages and accents is a beautiful thing, there's nothing quite as lovely as hearing the sound of a familiar voice or accent when you're in a crowd of strangers. Steve and I were having breakfast in the hotel one morning and there was a couple sitting nearby and as soon as one of them spoke to the other, Steve and I both turned to each other and said, “That's an Southern accent!” Then for the next few minutes, we kind of eavesdropped on their conversation – just enjoying the sound of their southern drawl and the warm and fuzzy feeling of familiarity that it brought.

I think that's how the crowd must have felt that day. Jerusalem was a big city – and you can imagine how busy it would have been with the influx of crowds – Jews from so many different tribes, multitudes of

people from far away lands: Parthians, Medes, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, visitors from Rome, Cretans and Arabs. This diverse crowd, overwhelmed I'm sure by the almost deafening sounds of the hustle and bustle of the big city, and then, through the noise, they hear a familiar sound – Our scripture tells us that as the disciples spoke, the crowd could hear, each of them in their own languages as the Apostles spoke about God's deeds of power. In other words, the Apostles didn't expect the crowd to learn their language, and the Spirit didn't give the crowd the ability to understand the language of the Apostles - but the Apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit and the Spirit gave them the ability to speak the languages of those around them. And the crowd of people were drawn by the familiar language that they heard. It made their hearts stop for a moment as they tuned their ears more carefully to the words. This was the beginning of the building of a community, walls were being replaced with bridges, and it began with those on the inside speaking the language of those on the outside. Of course, there were those on the outside who thought that the disciples were drunk, were not in their right minds. And that is a risk we face when we're truly led by the spirit.

And so there is a lesson for us today, Church. This pandemic and the restrictions we've faced over the last year have forced us to work outside of the church walls exclusively – it's forced us to gather together in this place – this virtual space and to rely on the power of the Spirit to reach those who need to hear the truth of the Gospel. This past year has forced us to speak our neighbour's language, to find innovative and creative ways to be the church, to spread the love and grace of Jesus Christ and the Spirit has led us and will continue to lead us as we come back together in our buildings – when we are once again, all together in one place. My prayer today is that the Holy Spirit is poured out on us in a way that we can't be still and we can't be silent – even if people think we're not in our right minds. – I pray that as we're open to the leading of the spirit, we will be empowered to communicate so that our words are so familiar to those around us, that it draws them in to see the source of our joy and peace and power.

Let's not hope to go back to "the way things were before". Let's not hope for "normal" church. But instead, let's be empowered by the Spirit to speak in languages other than our own, to build bridges instead of walls, to bring community where there has been conflict.

Happy Birthday Church!