

Rev. Dr. David Holyan

“Life Changing Peace”

First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, June 9, 2019

**Acts 2:1-21**

*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.*

*Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.’ All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ But others sneered and said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’*

*But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: ‘Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:*

*“In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams,*

*Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.*

*And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.*

*The sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood,*

*before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.  
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”*

**John 14: 8-17, 25-27**

*Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.*

*‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.*

*‘I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach*

*you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to You and to the power of Your spirit. We celebrate this day, the work of the spirit within us. We celebrate this day, the work of the spirit in the church throughout the ages. And we pray that as we gather here in worship, Your spirit would take all of the words that we hear and offer, the words that are within us, and transform them by mystery and power into the living word--the living word of Jesus Christ, and let that word abide deep within us. Let it guide us, comfort us and challenge us. Let it be the word that we speak and, more importantly, let that word become flesh in what we do. We ask this this day in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

On the day of Pentecost, the sound of a rushing wind came and all of a sudden people from all over an entire region who happened to be believers in Jesus Christ began to speak in their own languages and understood one another. People from all parts of the area around Jerusalem and the Holy Land from Rome all the way coming east to Jerusalem and beyond that into the Persian Gulf area. North up into the lower parts of Europe all the way down into Egypt. People gathered together and began to speak to one another in their own language and they understood each other. They understood that they were one together, believers in Jesus Christ.

And today we celebrate not just the gift of the spirit coming upon us as individuals, but I want to lift up a celebration of the spirit coming not to us as individuals but to us as a community of faith. And not just this community of faith but the church universal where the spirit of God continues to do its work in making the deeds of Christ and the mission of Christ and the ministry of Christ known in our world. And to celebrate this in some sense is to lift up a very counter-cultural notion of what it means to be a believer in Jesus Christ. For many in our world, many in our community, many in our family and maybe even some of us, believe that our faith in Jesus Christ is something that is very private and only ours to worry about. That God saved me and therefore I am different and unique. I am special in God's eyes. And I now am the arbiter of God's truth in this world.

When we act in this way I believe that we misunderstand this passage in Scripture and in many other ways. For one of the problems with our English language is that we have this pronoun, "you", that means you the individual and also when we use the word *you* as plural for all of you. So in Scripture, we're never quite sure if God is talking to me or to us and I can assure you that 99 times out of 100, it is always addressing us-- that these words of Scripture, even of Jesus in this passage from the Gospel of John, where he says, "Very truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do. In fact, will do greater works than these because I am going to the--" on and on. When he says the word *you*, he means all of you together, which is, in a sense, a second level truth. Because, yes, you are special to God, and the Spirit resides within you. But more importantly, that Spirit of God draws you into community, like here in this congregation, and that community is a fuller expression of God's plan and desire in this world. "If in my name all of you ask me for anything, I will do it. If you love me, all of you will keep my commandments." Jesus is talking about the Spirit abiding within each of us and within us as a community of faith. And what does that mean for us in today's world? What does it mean that our faith in Jesus Christ calls us to a deeper understanding of what it means when scripture speaks to you? I wonder if this day, like on the day of Pentecost, it means that people of diverse views and cultures and backgrounds can speak their own language and be honored and respected and, more importantly, can be understood by one another.

It seems over the course of the last several months, if not years, one of the things that has bothered me the most is the political discourse in our country-- a discourse that far too often vilifies someone of a different political persuasion simply because they don't believe like I do. Democrats vilify Republicans. Republicans vilify Democrats. Pro-choice people vilify abortion-- sorry. I got a little off track in my head. Abortion is one of the issues where people are vilifying each other on opposite sides. Any issue, really, we have the opportunity to look at someone who believes differently than I do and say, "Well, they're evil." And when we say that and believe that, it causes divisions. And I believe it diminishes what it means for us to be Christians because I have yet to find an issue, whatever it is, where there are not Christians on either side of it-- good Christians, faithful Christians. In fact, in preparing for this sermon, I ran across the blog called Wholeness/Oneness/Justice. And in it, the author writes, "I do not know about others, but when I read Scripture, I tend to read it mostly from a personal, individual perspective. In the book of John, Jesus is quoted as talking a lot about oneness. What happens when I read the same Scripture from the perspective of all of God's people being one? The reason I ponder this today is how I was struck by my reading of the phrase, "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." What does God do when all of God's people ask for different 'anythings' that maybe counter to one another? In fact, not too long ago I had a head-on conversation collision with a man once regarding the use of the death penalty,

which I'm strongly against. He told me, "The Bible ordains capital punishment and no matter what you say, you cannot get around that," which ended the conversation. What does God do when I pray to find a way to end capital punishment and this man, a Christian, prays that my efforts will be unsuccessful? I use this example because it is concise and easy to understand. Our world, the world that we live in, is very complex. What do we do when we have an issue that we believe we are on the right side of and someone that we know who's a Christian believes the exact opposite? Does it mean that we are right and they are evil? Or does it mean that they simply have a different perspective than we do? That the spirit that is at work within them is causing them to believe something very different from our own understanding? If Pentecost teaches us anything, it teaches us to look beyond our differences to what binds us together.

In our political discourse what binds us together is that we are citizens of the United States of America. So underneath and around the container, if you will, for all of our political divisions and disruptions is that we're of a common creed and within that commonality we need to trust that we're working in good faith towards outcomes that are opposite to each other but that are not evil. Many years ago when I took a course on religion and terrorism, it talked about the basic elements of what makes someone a terrorist, a terrorist based on a religious belief, and the number one thing is that person believes that they are the sole arbiter of the truth and that anyone that believes different from them is of the devil. And so they stop seeing that person who opposes their view as a person and they see them simply as an enemy. And if you have the truth and someone is out to destroy the truth, you have a simple task in front of you, destroy that enemy. And yet Pentecost teaches us to love our neighbors even when we view things differently, when we speak different languages, when we come from different cultures, when our interests, our nature, our attitudes are at complete odds, Pentecost says, "No, the spirit is at work among all of you."

So what this tells me is that the work of the spirit is still messy and challenging because we need to work together in order to find those common things that draw us together. Loving our neighbors, serving the poor, feeding the hungry, providing comfort to those who are sick, proclaiming scripture, offering prayer, being in worship together, these are what draw us, as Christians, together regardless of how we view an issue or our political beliefs, there's a deeper, richer truth that we have that draws us together and holds us together. And it is by far one of the things that I love about this congregation the most is that we are a safe place for people of different persuasions and views and natures and ideas. That we are Republican and Democrat, we are straight and gay, we are conservative and liberal, we are you name it and whatever its opposite is, and there is someone here who embodies that perspective and rather than fighting, we love one another. Rather than getting angry, we compromise. Rather than leaving and causing division, we unite. And to me, the beauty of Pentecost is that in the individuals coming together just as in any bonfire that you've ever seen, when one log is alight there's a beautiful flame but when another and another and another begin to be alit, the flame just dances and grows and it's just more energetic and more warm and more inviting.

So I want to invite all of us to remember Pentecost. I want to invite us the next time that we come across something that upsets us or concerns us to take a deep breath and rather than assuming the worst about that person who is espousing that idea, I want to invite you to consider that they're part of you, that they might be a follower of Jesus Christ just like you who simply sees the world differently. And rather than trying to be right, maybe we should work towards understanding our neighbors. Maybe we should trust that, in fact, we are a people of Pentecost and that the spirit of God dances within all of us. Amen.