

“PROCLAIM JUBILEE”

Acts 2:1-21 May 29th, 2018

This Sunday is the Great Day of Pentecost. Pentecost is the High Feast Day for Christians as on this day we celebrate the story of the Church’s Birthday. This is the day when the Christ’s Holy Spirit made a home in God’s people and formed the Church. It is a day to celebrate how the Holy Spirit gifts Christ’s disciples with the talents to transform the world. So it’s an especially appropriate day to celebrate our Sunday School teachers and recognize how much we have appreciated their time and talents spent over the past school year with our children.

So often when congregations think of Pentecost, they associate it with the birthday of the church of Jesus Christ. They may sing “Happy Birthday” and have balloons and cake and a party atmosphere to make the day special. And while there is technically nothing wrong with celebrating the birth of the church on Pentecost, the problem with focusing *only* on Pentecost as a birthday celebration causes the day to suffer the same fate as most other birthday celebrations: it puts the focus of the day entirely on those being celebrated; that is on those who are already members of the church.

The story of Pentecost was not told to celebrate those who were already disciples of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples who *had* gathered in Jerusalem as Jesus had instructed, not simple to remind them that he was still with them, for the purpose of *empowering and equipping* them to be witnesses to the grace of Jesus Christ for those who had not yet heard the good news of his saving love for them!

Pentecost is one of the oldest feast days of the church of Jesus Christ

Celebrated, second in importance only to Easter as a high, holy day for the early church. This is a wonderful fact of history that we as a church need to recover and reclaim! Can you imagine if we took Pentecost as seriously as the early church did and through our celebrations said to the whole church, “Pentecost is more important than Christmas!” Because if we look to history, that is true!

Today, in addition to Pentecost, we United Methodists are marking the fiftieth anniversary of the United Methodist Church as we celebrate Heritage Sunday. It was on April 23rd, 1968, that the Methodist Church and the Evangelical Brethren Church officially joined together to become the United Methodist Church. As United Methodists we have traditionally celebrated this Day each year on the third Sunday in May, to correspond with Aldersgate Day.

Aldersgate Day is celebrated on May 24 (or the Sunday closest) to commemorate the day in 1738 when John Wesley experienced assurance of his salvation. Wesley reluctantly attended a group meeting that evening on Aldersgate street in London. As he heard a reading from Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans, he felt his “heart strangely warmed.” Wesley wrote in his journal that at about 8:45 p.m. “while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

The theme for the 2018 celebration of Heritage Sunday is “Proclaim Jubilee!” Jubilee is about reconciliation, forgiving of debts, release from slavery, and restoration of lands to their rightful owners so that all can move forward together in a spirit of peace.

It seems ironic, then, that as we celebrate fifty years as a denomination that we are awaiting a special called general conference this coming February to determine the fate of our union. Will there be a celebration of 51 years next May, or will we be unable as a body to find a way to reconcile, forgive the debts of those with whom we disagree, restore our lands to their rightful owners, and find a way forward together?

Pentecost is about the moment the church was born. It is about what the church of Jesus Christ is supposed to be. It is about the church moving forward while acknowledging the traditions, values and the sacrifices of the past. It is about the Holy Spirit bring people together as one in spite of their differences: different cultures, different languages, different traditions, different beliefs, different interpretations, different theologies. Pentecost is about being unified in words, and in a salvation that is for all people.”

“Unified in word”—these days that can seem almost impossibly difficult! I’m thinking of the language of computer usage—I’m still on a steep learning curve with that one! It feels like learning another language and I do better some days than others. Or the language of teenagers and or texting-- other languages I learn kind of on a “need to know basis.” Mary Austin tells about her husband recently admitting to signing his texts to teen-age daughter with LOL, thinking he was conveying “Lots of Love” but instead it was “Laugh Out Loud.” Even speaking standard English in the same family, parents think they’re saying one thing, and teenagers hear a different message.

The Pentecost story in Acts is really a story about miscommunication- and God’s investment in understanding. In a cosmopolitan city, with people from so many different nations, there are dozens of languages being spoken in a cloud

of discordant sound. The Spirit arrives, and gives the untaught disciples the ability to speak in the languages of the people around them. Adding to the mystery, the people watching the arrival of the Spirit misunderstand what they're seeing. They blame spirits, instead of seeing the work of the Spirit.

Language can unite, or divide us—or both at the same time. God doesn't care much that we speak the exact same language, but is deeply concerned that people understand both the holy and one another. We seek sameness of language when we know it isn't possible, and all the while God is seeking deeper understanding between us.

With the gift of so many languages, God reveals (again) that God is not interested in making us all the same. Instead, God invests divine energy in building bridges between us. Instead of getting the bystanders to all understand the same language, the Spirit reaches out in a gesture of hospitality, and allows each person to understand in the language that's comfortable for them. The Spirit reveals itself to be the universal translator! In the same way that God has worked since the creation, God opts for variety. God chooses to keep the many languages and customs of the early church, instead of shaping everyone into the same language.

Pentecost, fifty days after Easter, is often called the birthday of the Christian church, as I've mentioned. This story gives us a parallel to the opening of Luke's gospel, and to the birth of Jesus. The Spirit that broods over the water at creation makes her appearance here, too. This new birth is only starting with the church. Building on the prophecy of Joel, Peter is announcing a whole new age.

This is a gift with purpose. Tongues "as of fire" appear over their heads, signifying the gift of the Spirit. By the power of that Spirit, Jews from all over the world, gathered in Jerusalem for Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks, hear

about God's grace in the languages of foreign lands. This is not just the birthday of the church, but the sending out of the community into the world. The people who have been gathering in locked rooms are given a gift to connect them with the rest of the world, and are sent out into it.

Language is a means of unity in the Spirit breaks in with this gift. We need language to communicate with each other, on important and not so critical topics.

Yesterday morning I did get up at five am to watch the Royal Wedding between Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, now the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. I am mainly English on both sides of my family and I enjoy following the events in the lives of the British Royal family. The wedding was a much discussed event beforehand and I did see some references to the difference in our language. Yes, Americans and the British speak English—with different accents and some different words for the same thing. In England a sweater is a “jumper”, an apartment is a “flat”, and a cookie is a “biscuit.” There are many more but you get the idea.

There are two much more important topics where language is difficult. Race is another area where we find it hard to speak the same language. In an interview with Krista Tippett, scholar and author John Powell said that ‘race is like gravity. And I like to use that metaphor, because-what scientists say is, all of us have weight. And so we would think we might all be experts in gravity, but scientists say there are probably 12 people in the world that really understand gravity. And I would say, there's only a few more in the world that understand race, but it's actually incredibly complex, once we start peeling it back.’ Powell adds, ‘I'm old enough to have been born ‘colored.’ And then I became a “negro”. And then I became ‘African-American.’ And then I became ‘afro.’ And people are just, now confused—“So, what are we?” And part of the confusion—and each of

those terms are significant. But also, race is deeply relational. And it's interesting, if you go back and think about how "whiteness" was early defined in America, it was defined largely as 'not-black'."

Powell notes that we don't have the right language to talk about race, and so we try not to. "So one of the things about language is, language is never quite right, but neither is not-language." The words we use for race try to illuminate, and often end up dividing us.

As a US embassy opens in Jerusalem, evangelical Christians and peace activists, Jews and Palestinians, all seem to be speaking different languages about the move. For their part, evangelical Christians are praising the move by the President. "Millions of evangelical eyes were on Trump, waiting to see if he would keep his campaign promise to move the embassy," longtime Pastor John Hagee told Fox News ahead of the president's official announcement. "I can assure you that 60 million evangelicals are watching this promise closely because if President Trump moves the embassy into Jerusalem, he will historically step into immortality," Hagee said.

The Embassy opening came amid Palestinian protests along the Gaza border, as Israeli soldiers killed more than 50 Palestinian protesters, and injured several thousand others. While some rejoice at the symbolic move others see it as an act of aggression. Both "the Palestinians and the Israelis claim Jerusalem as their capital, and the city contains sites sacred to both Jews and Muslims.,,The international community considers East Jerusalem occupied territory. But that half of the city also contains sites holy to all three major monotheistic religions,including the Western Wall ,the holiest place in the world where Jews can openly pray, and Haram al-Sharif, Arabic for "the Noble Sanctuary," a sacred site for Muslims

that Israelis refer to as the Temple of the Mount. The Palestinians want to officially divide the city and make East Jerusalem the capital of a future Palestinian state. The Israelis disagree.. “In Jerusalem right now, no one understands the language of the others.”

The people in the original crowd listening in Jerusalem, hearing the followers of Jesus speaking in their own languages, are bewildered, amazed and astonished. They are willing to be perplexed, and even surprised. Almost in spite of themselves, they are drawn into it. Where do we allow ourselves to be drawn into God’s story, willingly or in spite of ourselves? Where do we set aside rational thought and let ourselves be amazed by God?

There are so many languages represented in that busy street in Jerusalem. It’s almost as if the world has come to the disciples, calling them out into it. How do we, as people of faith, go out into the world? What languages do we need to learn to speak, by God’s grace, to communicate with teenagers, with people with different backgrounds from our own, with the homeless, with nonbelievers who need to hear about the Good News of the Gospel?

The sound of the rushing wind must have been incredibly loud to draw a crowd. The story tells us that the sound fills the house where the disciples are staying. How, then, do they end up out in the street, where everyone can see and hear them? Does the excitement move them out? Does the sound become too noisy? Where do we see that kind of movement in our own lives or in the life of our faith community?

Scholar John Powell says that language can shift us out of our isolation. “And there was a period of time when I was feeling really overwhelmed with a lot of this stuff. And I was talking to my dad, and I said, ‘Dad, this is just

too much. I can't do it all. I'm trying to do all of this stuff by myself.' And he looked at me; he said, 'Well, John, you know you're not alone.' And I said, 'Well, what do you mean, Dad?' He said, 'Well, you got God with you.' And I realized, although I don't organize around God in the way that he does, my mistake was, I thought I had to do it; that "I" was defining it, instead of "we." In the Acts text, we also see language as vehicle to move people out of isolation.

The story from Acts, with the fire and wind and speech, reminds us of the energy God uses to communicate with humankind. God goes to extraordinary lengths to keep communicating with us, inattentive and reluctant as we are. The Pentecost story is another chapter in the long history of God's extravagant communication. If God spends that much time and energy on communication, surely we, made in the divine image, have the same obligation. Amen and amen.