

Gathered and Scattered

May 23, 2010

Pentecost Sunday – May 23, 2010; Tim Devine
St. Paul's United Church of Christ; Seattle, Washington

It is Pentecost – the birthday of the church. Differing languages become understood. God's presence is made known. God's power is obvious. In the annual reading from the second chapter of Acts, suddenly there was "*a sound like the rush of a violent wind,*" as well as "*divided tongues as of fire.*"

Pentecost was the Greek name given to the Jewish festival of Shavuot, which occurred (and still occurs) fifty days after Passover. In the time of the Biblical narrative Jews from all over the Roman Empire would have gathered in Jerusalem for the festival. The reason that these days that are honored in both the Christian and Jewish calendars are sometimes different is that Christian holidays follow a solar calendar while Jewish holidays follow a lunar one.

So, over time, the Christian church has celebrated the original Pentecost story – the story of the Holy Spirit rushing through the room and appearing above the very startled people. And the presence of the Holy Spirit is depicted in our two banners on either side of the stained glass windows in the chancel – the baptism of Jesus with the dove (on your left) and the Pentecost fire (on your right).

Red over time emerged as a color for vestments and banners for this day, symbolizing fire and passion and the Holy Spirit. The red cloth fabric draping on either side of the sanctuary was a gift from the ordination service of Jennifer Brownell, as red is used in services of installation and ordination, again symbolizing the presence of the Spirit.

Pentecost has also been a favorite Sunday for churches with formal confirmation programs to have those young persons confirmed and invited into church membership on that day. And it can be a big deal. Five years ago our own Katharine Kirk made a pilgrimage of sorts, back to St. John's United Church of Christ in St. Charles, Missouri. Pentecost is Confirmation Sunday in that church and she returned for the 75th anniversary of her confirmation – the diamond anniversary class – and it was a joyful homecoming. So today marks the 80th anniversary of that event – congratulations again!

In the original Pentecost story the gathered crowd is amazed as they all hear and understand each others' languages. It would have been an amazing linguistic event in which people of many different languages and lands – representing the known world at that time – were, in that moment, one in their hearing, if not their understanding, of the deeper meaning of what they heard. Despite their differences, they could all hear what the disciples were saying, each in their own language. They were gathered together in a way that had never happened before.

But in addition to being gathered, language can also scatter. In the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Scriptures is another story of language and languages. It is the story of the Tower of Babel. These two stories are always paired together in my mind. In the earlier story God becomes upset with humankind as they are building a tower to reach up to the heavens, and they are clear that they want to be more like God through this effort. But God is not amused. The heaven aspiring tower is destroyed and God confuses the languages of the people on the earth. According to the narrative, up until that time all had spoken one language and had understood each other.

The story of the Tower of Babel attempts to answer the question “why there is such diversity of language in the world?” It has a similar feel to other stories in the Hebrew Scriptures in Genesis. Like the one of Adam and Eve that might be answering the questions – “Why is childbirth so difficult?” “Why is agriculture so hard?” Or even “Why are there such things as snakes?”

Noah and the Ark might be an attempt to answer questions about floods and the rainbow. Cain and Abel might be an attempt to answer why siblings often fight. And later on Job might be an attempt to explain why there is suffering in the world. Some scholars tell us that these are older folktales that are woven into the Biblical narrative.

But, whatever their origin, these stories are trying to make sense out of things that are often quite difficult to understand. It is part of our human nature to try and do this. We want knowledge. We want things to make sense. We don't want to be surprised.

So then, today the Pentecost story challenges the Tower of Babel story, where different languages effectively divided the people, one from another. Now, at least in that Pentecost moment, all languages are understood. Biblical scholars tell us that there was, in fact, an ancient utopian ideal of one universal language. So, both the Pentecost and the Tower of Babel stories provide interesting twists on that early aspiration.

On the day of Pentecost God's Holy Spirit was poured out on everyone present. This violent wind and energizing spirit and especially the tongues of fire were pretty visible. This was not some quiet conversation in an out-of-the-way place or a personal inner mystical experience. This was also not some easy continuation of the status quo, but a new reality that soon demanded new responses and offered new challenges.

There was a power that transformed the disciples who had up until this time been hiding behind locked doors for fear of the religious authorities, into a group of people not afraid of anything. Contrary to popular culture, it wasn't the experience of Jesus' resurrection that pushed them into this new and fearless place, but the experience of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In this case wind and fire brought transformation rather than destruction. At this particular point all who have been scattered are gathered together.

And, when those who do try to explain it away do so by saying, “*They are filled with new wine,*” it is publicly rejected by Peter. Yet another miracle! That same disciple who at his nadir publicly rejected Jesus three times has now found his voice.

Often in the Biblical narrative God's actions are recorded as more of a private affair. They are solitary conversations with people in secluded places, like with Moses on Mount Sinai, with Jesus on Mount Tabor, or with Jesus and John the Baptist at the Jordan River. They happen when the person is either alone or with only a few other persons nearby. But this Pentecost story is for everyone. There are no outsiders.

And, as mentioned earlier, it works to think of Pentecost as the birthday – or birth – of the church. As births are rarely neat or tidy or quiet, then by the same token the birth of the Christian church is no different. The feast of Pentecost – of harvest – is an interesting time to think about pregnancy and birth, and the great crowd of persons present who were transformed by the experience can be seen as another kind of harvest – of people – and one that leads to even greater possibilities of growth and hope and new life. As with any birth, Pentecost may not be quiet or peaceful, but it is powerful and exhilarating and exhausting and the participants will never be the same.

At the close of the Pentecost story Peter gives a sermon about the joy that they have experienced through knowing Jesus the Christ. It is his truth and the way of those friends and followers. It then becomes the way of many who hear the story and are impressed by the Pentecost wind and spirit and tongues of fire. But living in a gathered and scattered world, one particular way is not the ultimate truth for everyone.

The Holy Spirit is a presence and a power that offers all of us strength for the journey. It can bridge the chasms of diversity and fear. It can confuse and empower. It cannot be controlled or channeled into working for us. Rather, it speaks to us and acts upon us.

On Pentecost, may we take our understandings from a God who ultimately does not scatter us in confusion, but makes clear to all of us our promise as God's children, no matter what our spiritual path. May this Pentecost promise of possibility overcome our Tower of Babel human pride – yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Amen.