

C Pentecost
2013 May 19
Acts 2.1-21
"Who's in Charge Here?"

A little boy approached his parents one Pentecost morning, asking how much it would cost to get into church that day. He held his hand open to show a fist-full of pennies, asking, "Is this enough?" He thought it was penny-cost Sunday.

We read this story from the second chapter of Acts every Pentecost Sunday because, well, because that's what Pentecost in the Christian tradition is all about. It is good to remind ourselves that the day has an entirely different meaning for our Jewish sisters and brothers.

It is worthwhile to spend a moment or two reviewing the Jewish meaning of the day, because it has a bearing on the Christian meaning. Our English word Pentecost comes from a Greek word pronounced almost the same way, which means "fiftieth." It is given that name in Greek because it is the fiftieth day following the Day of Passover every year. Its Hebrew name is Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks, because it is commanded in the Book of Exodus that the Hebrews would celebrate the day a "week of weeks" or 49 days after the Passover. In Hebrew tradition Shavuot celebrated both the spring harvest and the gift of the Torah, the Law, given to the Israelites by God.

I have sometimes made the mistake of thinking that the crowds who were amazed that day, those Parthians and Medes and Elamites and so on, were pilgrims in Jerusalem for Pentecost. But if you read the text carefully in verse 5 we see that these folks are living in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is their home, but Aramaic, the common language of the Jews, is not their language. Indeed, the languages of commerce at that time were Greek and Roman.

So it is they are amazed and astonished when they hear this group of Galileans speaking about God's deeds of power in their own languages. This happens, of course, after the Holy Spirit rushes into the midst of them like a wind, and tongues, kind of like flames of fire, come to rest on each one of them. By the way, the group of Jesus-followers who are given the gift of speaking in all of these languages is probably much larger than just the twelve disciples. In chapter one, we read of a sum total of about 120 believers on the Day of Pentecost.

In the old West, Jose Rodriguez was a notorious bank robber. He would sneak across the border from Mexico, rob banks in Texas, and then escape back into Mexico before the rangers could catch up with him. One day, though, the rangers illegally crossed the border into Mexico and followed Jose into a bar.

When they finally took him into custody, they discovered that Jose did not speak any English and none of the police spoke Spanish. But the bartender informed them that he spoke both Spanish and English and would be happy to serve as an interpreter. So the police asked, "Where did you hide all that money?" And the bartender translated into

Spanish. At first, Jose hesitated, but then when he saw all those police officers, ready to draw their weapons, he began to tell the bartender where the money was. The bartender listened carefully as Jose explained how he had hidden it in a certain cave that was just outside of town. The bartender then turned to the police, who were waiting for the translation and said, "Jose is a very brave man. He said that you are all a bunch of low-down cowards, and to go ahead and shoot him if you want."

There is something implicit in the Pentecost story that we must not miss. The group of Jesus-followers is speaking in the languages of those who have immigrated to Jerusalem and have come to call it home. The Holy Spirit does not act on these Parthians and Medes and Elamites and so on, so that as these disciples speak in Aramaic, they are able to understand somehow. No. The Spirit gives to the disciples the ability to speak to these immigrants, each in her or his own language.

That, of course, is the continuous and relentless message of the book we know as The Acts of the Apostles. The good news of salvation in Christ is for all the world, not just for the Jews. What purpose would be achieved for the disciples to be preaching the good news, with joy, in languages of their neighboring regions, if the good news weren't for those there who could hear and understand it? The gospel, the good news, of Christ is for all the world, not just for the Jews, not just for those who speak Aramaic. For all the world.

Many of you have probably heard of the work of Wycliffe Bible Translators, an organization started only in 1942, which has translated the Bible into over 700 languages in over 90 countries. Here is Wycliffe's vision: "That God's Word is accessible to all people in a language that speaks to their heart." Central to this vision is the understanding that the scriptures speak to people through the power of the Holy Spirit, and that there is no preferred language for transmission of the word of God. So although the scriptures were written in Hebrew and ancient Greek, there is no necessity for those who want to read them to learn these languages. Instead, dedicated Jesus-followers all over the world are engaged in the task of translating the Bible into native languages, all over the world.

And what agent is it that makes these words live for their readers, regardless of whether they speak Spanish or French or Indonesian or German? It is the Holy Spirit. When we approach these pages, we approach them with the prayer that the Spirit will make them live for us, that they will be God's word to us, and even more, that they will transform us, remake us, mold us, into the people God wants us to be. Who does that? The Holy Spirit does it.

After some time, Peter stands up in front of the crowd and preaches a most remarkable sermon. We have only the first part of the sermon in today's reading. I encourage you to read the entire sermon for homework today. Acts 2:14-36.

But in the part we have read today Peter tells the crowd, essentially, "Look, don't be surprised by what you see here, because God told you this would happen. In fact, if you just read the prophet Joel you will see where he writes,

“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.

So don't be so surprised, you Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and others. God told you this would happen.

We remain in those last days, waiting for Jesus to return. So it is that our sons and daughters, our young men and old men, still may prophesy. The form of that prophecy probably will not be in foretelling what God is getting ready to do, but rather calling people of all languages and nations to follow Jesus, so that they may call on the name of the Lord and thus be saved.

You are those young and old women, those young and old men. You are the means by which the Holy Spirit will move others to investigate this Jesus, to see if he really is what we say he is. And you will almost certainly end up doing it one person at a time, because not all of us are moved by the Spirit to stand up in front of a crowd and preach, like Peter. One person, dearly loved by God, at a time.

Pentecost, Shavuot, in the Jewish tradition celebrated the spring harvest. Pentecost in the Christian tradition celebrates, among other things, the harvest that Jesus mentions in the tenth chapter of Luke, who is also the author of Acts, of course. There Jesus prepares to send seventy of his followers into the towns and villages of Galilee to preach the good news. He says to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few,” meaning that there are so many there who need to hear the news they have to bring, but so few to carry it to them.

We read later in chapter 2 of Acts that about 3,000 of those Parthians and Medes and Elamites and so on, came to believe in Christ and were baptized on that same day. The harvest begins, and continues to this day. And you are the laborers.

Shavuot, Pentecost, in the Hebrew tradition also celebrates the gift of the Law to the Jews. On the particular Pentecost Day recorded in Acts 2, the Spirit and Peter reveal to the Parthians and Medes and Elamites and etc., that the living God is giving a new law, a law personified in the life and teachings, in the death and resurrection of one Jesus of Nazareth, who is their Messiah, the Son of God. That's what the prophet Jeremiah means when he delivers the word of God to his people. The LORD says there through Jeremiah, “I will place my law within them, and write it on their hearts.” This particular Pentecost, in our Christian tradition, celebrates the giving of a new law, in and through Christ Jesus.

The Holy Spirit is at work in each one of you, and in Community Presbyterian Church, and in the church worldwide, to this very day, doing amazing, astonishing things.

It is not our church. It is Christ's church. And we are not in charge. The Holy Spirit is.