

Sermon: Bewildered and Blessed
Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost Sunday
May 19, 2024
Rev. Karen H Roberts

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. *2* 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. *3* Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. *4* All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. *5* Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. *6* And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. *7* Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" *8* And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? *9* Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, *10* Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, *11* Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." *12* All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" *13* But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." *14* 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. *15* Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. *16* No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: *17* "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. *18* Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. *19* And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. *20* The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. *21* Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

I've been thinking a lot this week about Miss Peggy. Miss Peggy was a devoted member of the first church I served. I noticed her the very first Sunday. She was hard to miss because all I could see was the back of her beautiful blond head. I didn't know one could sit backward in a church pew, but Miss Peggy was a determined lady. She sat the entire service with her back to me. The next week was the same, the week after that the same.

Finally one day I ran into my council chair, who sat in the same pew as this woman. I said, "Who is the blond lady that sits near you and why does she sit with her back to me every Sunday?" He laughed and said, "Oh, that's my mother in law, she doesn't want to have a woman preacher but when she called a previous minister to complain and say she was going to quit coming to church, he told her that this was her church and she should not quit coming, she should give the new preacher a chance. So, she is coming because he said she should, but she isn't ready to give you a chance."

I found this quite amusing...bewildered, amazed, and perplexed...might be good descriptors as well. Those are the words that stood out to me this week in Luke's Pentecost story, recorded in the book of Acts. I can see the Disciples, eyes squinting

as they emerge from the dark room they've been locked away in, fearful that Rome will come drag them to crucifixion as they did Jesus...unsure about what it means that they've seen Jesus, once fully dead, now fully alive...yet on this day...something has happened. They leave their locked safe haven and go out into the crowded festival to preach...to be bold...to be invitational. As if that weren't enough of a miracle...they are heard...people listen and understand them. Even though the crowd is gathered from all over the world, and they speak different languages, they suddenly, thanks to the Spirit, can hear and understand each other.

Bewildered, amazed, perplexed – that is the result. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" And there is the rub...just like Miss Peggy didn't believe a woman preacher could do much, so the crowd didn't believe a bunch of Galileans could either. Maybe they looked at them like we look at those we label – hillbilly, or redneck, or maybe yankee, or "one of them..."

You have to wonder, were they bewildered, amazed, astonished, perplexed by what God is doing...or who God chooses to do it through? We can do that sometimes...put each other in categories and assign labels that serve to limit expectations and hinder understanding. We do it when we think of others as "those people" instead of "people."

There has been far too much of that in faith communities, but in many places it is changing. Several years ago, my uncle died. He was of the Baptist faith but he wanted me to speak at his funeral...it was a church I had attended for years as a child...but they refused to let me speak at first...a woman couldn't stand in their pulpit, they said. They eventually, after some pressure from a few church members who wanted to honor my family, allowed me to speak from the floor. This past week, however, another small Baptist church not only opened their pulpit to me, but did so with hospitality, and grace, and love.

That's what brought Miss Peggy to mind. I knew that as long as she came to church and sat with her back to me, she was closing herself off from hearing and understanding. So, every week, I walked back and spoke to her. I tried to speak her language...as a woman, as a mother, as a daughter. I tried to learn her language...as a cancer survivor, as an orphan, as a widow. It was then that I began to notice, each week, a subtle change in her position. Each week, she began to shift her body, ever so slightly, in my direction. It ended up being her brother's death that finally opened the door. I simply showed up at the funeral as a sign of love from our church. I saw her look at me when the family processed in...first the shock of seeing me there, then the pleasure. After the service she came and took my hand and began introducing me to people, "This my pastor..." she said. The next Sunday, she sat facing fully forward in the pew. Miss Peggy and I were both blessed by the relationship that developed after that. She became my biggest supporter, and I became her biggest fan.

There are many things I love about the Pentecost story...the way God moves in fire and wind...all consuming and powerful...the way the Spirit pulls fearful, hidden disciples out to speak boldly in a crowd...the transforming work of God through the Spirit that guides them in what they should do and what they should speak.

But this year, my favorite part of the story is the way the crowd stops and listens to those that they would have previously turned their backs on. This year it is the power of the Spirit to help us overcome our prejudices and labels and narrow expectations in order to see that God lets the Holy Spirit fall on anyone God chooses...and if we will stop and listen, even to the most unexpected of messengers, we might hear and understand more about who God is, how Christ saves, and where the Holy Spirit might be calling us next.

This, my friends, is the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the Church. The Spirit is unifying in that it helps us to hear and know each other. It helps us to see more commonality than division. It helps us to be one with God and one with each other. Why are we so fearful of that?

Yesterday, I left Cynthia Sturdivant's funeral where our theme was love...how her life exemplified a sharing of love...and then I went and officiated a wedding and talked more about love. In my homily, I said to the bride and groom:
I hope when life brings challenges, your love brings solutions.
I hope when moments are less than you desire, your love brings encouragement.
I hope when daily life feels mundane, your love brings a fresh breath that renews.
In all my hopes for you...I hope the way you feel about one another at this moment, will deepen, grow, and flourish into a mighty power and a complete good.

It strikes me that these are words of hope for the Church as well. In our diversity, we can find strength. In our love we can find solutions, encouragement, a fresh Spirit of renewal and a might power and complete good. It can't be lost on us, however, that the Spirit didn't just unify the Disciples and allow them to speak in order to be heard...but the Spirit enabled them to hear and understand. Isn't that the Church at its best? That we not only know how to rely on the Word of God to speak hope to a hurting world, but that we can also be willing to listen to the world's hurt...that we don't just expect to be the only ones talking, but that we learn the language and words of the bewilderment, amazement and confusion of the world and find a way to respond?

Isn't that the real blessing of Pentecost? The birth, not just of a church, but one that is connected to a community seeking hope, seeking God, seeking a transforming, powerful moment.