

## **"Filled With the Spirit" (Acts 2:1-21)**

Let us pray. Dear God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Happy Birthday! Yes, Happy Birthday! Today is somebody special's birthday. I can see you are trying to figure out whose it is. Let's see, it's not Jesus' birthday because everybody knows we celebrate that on December 25<sup>th</sup>. Is it my wife's birthday? Your son's birthday? Your granddaughter's birthday? Your mother's birthday? Well, it might be. But there is someone else whose birthday we celebrate today. It is the church. Today, on Pentecost Sunday we celebrate the birthday of the church, Christ's body here on earth.

Several years ago, I attended a mission trip to an Indian reservation. On the trip, we had the privilege of attending an authentic Sun Dance ceremony. During the ceremony, I felt like I was suddenly filled with the Spirit. Even though I couldn't speak the language, I felt like I understood the symbolisms that were associated with the ceremony. I realized at that moment that though we had different ways of worshipping, we were still worshipping the same God or the same Creator.

Today's scripture lesson for today found in Acts 2:1-21 has to do with being filled with the Spirit. It also has to do with violent wind and fire and tongues and even with the much anticipated day of the Lord. And we see that it all takes place on the day of Pentecost.

Now before I dive into the Scripture, I must set the scene with just a bit of information. "There were three great Jewish festivals to which every male living within twenty miles of Jerusalem was legally bound to attend - The Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. Pentecost means 'the Fiftieth', and another name for Pentecost was 'the Feast of Weeks.' It was so called because it fell on the fiftieth day, a week of weeks, after the Passover. The Passover was celebrated in the middle of April; therefore Pentecost fell at the beginning of June. By that time traveling conditions were at their best. At least as many came to the Feast of Pentecost as came to the Passover" (Barclay, 23).

"The feast itself was significant in several ways. It had a historical significance in that it commemorated the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. It had an

agricultural significance in that at Passover, part of the first crop of barley was offered to God; and at Pentecost two loaves were offered in gratitude for the safe gathering in of the harvest. It also had significance in that the law laid it down that on that day people should not do their everyday work. So it was a holiday for everyone, and the crowds on the street would be greater than ever" (Barclay, 23).

We see that the twelve apostles were all together in one place. "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" (Acts 2:2-4).

For Luke, this Pentecost was the birthday of the church. And as you can see, he spares no expense in celebrating the occasion. He pulls out all the stops. He launches the church with a big bang. He doesn't just have pizza and ice cream and pony rides. He brings on the great wind which speaks of God's power and creativity. He brings on flames of fire that land on every single one of the disciples to embolden and empower them. And he gives them the ability to speak in amazing and prophetic ways so that people from all ends of the earth can understand the message they are charged to deliver.

The Scripture reading puts it this way. "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" (Acts 2:5-11).

I need to point out that there are two very different ways that Biblical scholars look at this unusual happening. Some, like William Barclay, maintain it was not likely that the apostles acquired the gift of speaking in foreign languages. Barclay gives two reasons for this. First Barclay says that in the early church people did

something called speaking in tongues. This was supposed to be directly inspired by the Spirit of God and was greatly coveted. Paul, however, did not approve of it. He preferred a message given in a language that could be understood. The second reason is that to speak in foreign languages was unnecessary. "For a crowd like that, at most two languages were necessary. Almost all Jews spoke Aramaic; and, even if they were Jews of the dispersion from a foreign land, they would speak the language which almost everyone in the world spoke at that time - Greek (Barclay, 24).

According to Barclay, what happened was that "for the first time in their lives, this mixed crowd was hearing the word of God in a way that struck straight home to their hearts and that they could understand. The power of the Spirit was such that it had given the disciples a message that could reach every heart" (Barclay, 24).

What was this message that could reach every heart? I think that it was love. Love of God, love for God, love for your neighbor, love for your enemy, love for those who are outcasts in society, love for those who are hurting or suffering, love for those who are struggling.

But as I mentioned, other scholars view it quite differently. They, too, believe that the message the disciples preached was powerful and compelling. But they believe something else was going on as well. They think that by the power of the Spirit these disciples found themselves miraculously able to convey the message in other languages. According to them, not only was the message compelling, but that God demonstrated on Pentecost that people would be equipped to take the good news to the ends of the earth.

Either way it is good news for us. It reminds us that the message that we disciples have been given to share is the right one and is a powerful one. And it reminds us that God will give us what we need in order to be faithful disciples. After all, with the power of the Spirit, even the timid disciples suddenly found themselves able to witness about Jesus the Christ. And even Peter, the very one who had been afraid and who had even denied his Lord, became emboldened enough to stand up in front of God and everybody and proclaim the Good News.

A word of caution might be necessary here. You see, the response to this miraculous birth of the church was quite mixed. The Scripture goes on to say that

"All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine'" (Acts 2:12-13). See what I mean? Many were impressed and amazed, but some sneered. So maybe we shouldn't be so surprised or discouraged when our attempts to share the Good News do not always produce immediate results.

Let's face it. The very first disciples, handpicked by Jesus himself, were made fun of and ridiculed. Here they were risking all that they had to be witnesses for Jesus the Christ, and what did they get for it. They were accused of being a bunch of drunks. But when we stop and think about it, should that really surprise us? The same thing happened to Jesus himself. In Luke 7, Jesus encounters people who accuse even him of being a glutton and a drunkard. And in Mark 3, his own family seeks to restrain him because they have heard that people think he has gone out of his mind. And some even have the nerve to accuse Jesus of working for the very devil himself.

Isn't that how it is still today? When we gather on Sundays to worship God, when we give of our time and talents, when we with open hearts give what we have, when we go on mission trips or do service projects, what is the response of the world? True, some are amazed. Others completely ignore us. But some people standing on the outside will ask the question "What does this mean?" or say something like "Why, those people must be crazy."

So what did they do when accused of being drunk? Did they back down? Did they give up? Did they go into hiding? No. Going back to the Scripture we see that, "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 nine o'clock in the morning. No this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel'" (Acts 2:14-16).

Peter then explains how Joel predicted that in the last days God will pour out God's Spirit upon all flesh. Upon men and women, children, the young, the elderly, and they shall prophesy or speak the word.

It is as if Peter looks them in the eyes and say, "You ain't seen nothing yet. God is just getting warmed up. Peter then concludes by talking about Joel's prediction of the day of the Lord. He boldly proclaims, "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" (Acts 2:19-21).

And the amazing thing is that according to Peter, everyone is invited. The message is meant for everybody. According to one commentary, "Verses 19-20 most likely refers to the crucifixion itself, not to the final judgment... Consequently, with the inauguration of God's New Age through Christ's death and resurrection, the call to salvation becomes truly universal; henceforth, from the dawn of the church onward, whoever cries out to the Lord from the depths of despair will receive salvation - both Jew and Gentile" (p. 280).

Today and everyday God pours out the Spirit on the whole world. With God's Spirit poured out on us the most timid of us can proclaim, the slowest among us can understand, and the most inarticulate of us can be understood. This is so because of the Holy Spirit, and it is so because of the message we have been given to share. The message is love. Love for a God who loved us so much that God gave God's only son so that we could have salvation. And we are given by God this inexhaustible supply of love to share. Love for our neighbors. Love for our enemies. Love for those who are outcasts. Love for those who are hurting. Love for those who are struggling. Love enough for the entire universe. May we be found this Sunday and every day to be filled with the Spirit—this Spirit of love.

So on this special day, let us celebrate Christ's church. Let us give thanks for his great love for all of us. Let us be reminded of the powerful message of healing and hope we have been given to share with the world. Let us be encouraged to know that his Spirit goes with us and enables us to be his body and to do his will. And let us dare to believe, that with his Spirit, we can do even more than we can dream or imagine. Thanks be to God. Amen.

-- Zachary Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; May 31, 2009