

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Pentecost Sunday

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Our worship today honors the outpouring of the promised Advocate-the Holy Spirit on the disciples. The sound of a rushing wind that accompanied the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was such that people came out of their homes in droves to determine what was going on. Jewish tradition holds that the law was given to Moses on Mount Sinai-seven weeks after the Passover in Egypt, when God broke the intransigent will of Pharaoh and the Egyptians as He sought to free the Israelites from slavery. The giving of the law cemented the creation of this new community, a community that was to be held bound together by their collective adherence to the law.

The law thus became the defining principle that set the Jews apart from other communities. And so in addition to culture and the burden of language being a mark of separation, the law created a barrier between its adherents and non-adherents. It also gave further impetus to the notion of a kind of superiority that insulated Jews from their neighbors and generated an aura of importance.

This is the kind of idea that unfortunately characterizes any group of people who for the sake of marked differences tend to look inward and not outward to a broader vision of all the possibilities that portends for the larger society.

And so if the law unintentionally further broadened the gap between Jews and their neighbors, Pentecost thus becomes the last piece of the puzzle that was meant to serve as a corrective measure designed to break down the barriers of faith, linguistics and culture, and more so to restore human belief in a creative process with the sole goal of unifying all of creation.

Having the Holy Spirit poured out on them, Peter and his friends, who now have tongues of fire resting on them set out from the room where they had been holed up to an open space and began proclaiming with zeal the redemptive act of God wrought in Jesus Christ.

Added to the surprise was the fact that the mostly fishermen from Galilee could be heard speaking in different tongues. Their confounded hearers asked, how come we hear these men speaking in the native language of each? That first act of the Pentecost story was the breaking down of linguistic barriers that had been a source of human difference.

For as in the story of the Tower of Babel, where those who spoke the same language felt a close affinity and so separated themselves from others and went their own way, language at Pentecost brought people together. And so the Galilean fishermen who probably knew no other language apart from Aramaic have now been given power by the Holy Spirit to be understood by their hearers. If language has been a wall of separation, the new community that is being inaugurated can no longer recognize language as a barrier.

That is not to say all will speak one single language, and even if we do, and some have an accent like I have, we would no longer consider language as a means of creating a bond between one and another but we will be moved by the power of the Holy Spirit to look beyond the limits that language places on our desire to create a more unifying world.

As Peter zealously proclaims redemption through Jesus, his cynical hearers who could care less about the sheer magnitude of what happened, felt it necessary to accuse the group of being drunk. In discounting their accusation, Peter argues that what they were witnessing was a fulfillment of God's promise- a promise which was first told by the prophet Joel: that God at the end of the age, will pour His Spirit on all people, all people, not just to some or a few, but all people. Peter by this claim establishes the second act: that what was transpiring was the coming of the Messianic age- a period markedly different from the not too distant past where God's covenant was with those who were the adherents of the law. God was establishing a new covenant and Christ was the bearer of the new covenant.

Paul in his letter to the Romans reflects on the extent to which all of creation has longed for this moment- a true moment of redemption, which was made possible by the presence of Christ among us. But even more telling is the presence of the Spirit- the ever abiding comforter who was promised of old, and by whose power the covenant of Christ with those who believe is sustained.

The Messianic age that has been ushered with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all people will be one in which all languages will be welcome, a new age in which members of this new community will build a society that looks beyond the fear of our restrictive world so as to embrace the vision of a world where all people are valued as being worthy of God's compassion and care.

The Church not only emerged from the dawn of the Messianic age, but it also became its mouthpiece, unifying people of many cultures, languages, ethnicities and colors. For the Church then, the only law that was to bind all people was love of neighbor and the only language that everyone should dare to understand was the language of service.

I am often confounded by Peter's response to the cynics who accused him and his colleagues as being drunk. For I think his response should have been that they were indeed drunk; but not with wine as they supposed, but rather with the Holy Spirit. For when we are moved by the Holy Spirit, when we respond to the Spirit's call, we often appear to cynics as being drunk, not because they saw us drinking nor do we smell of alcohol, but because they do not understand nor appreciate the testimony that we bear about redemption, and cannot understand our desire to participate in the life of service in the new community.

Like the apostles, the energy of the Holy Spirit within us makes us drunk, not with the wine of self-centeredness but the kind of drunkenness, which spikes the desire to seek out the mending of a broken creation. I learned that the road to service is traveled with integrity, compassion and understanding. And that people don't really care about what we know until they know that we care about them.

If we think more closely about it, offering ourselves for service in the new community doesn't require that we speak the same language nor does it require that we know the recipient of our offer of service-it only requires that we are drunk enough by the Holy Spirit to show that we care.

Several weeks ago I took some of our youth to Face-to-Face. One of our boys Austin Romig was wearing a Tee-shirt with Fort Washington written on the front. There was a patron who didn't know Austin's name but was appreciative of his service to a tissue paper and wrote on it "Thank You, Fort Washington" and gave it to Austin.

I am sure he could have asked Austin's name but he didn't have to-all he knew was that Austin cared so much to be there to serve, and so with what he had, he shared his true feelings of appreciation with Austin. The Spirit indeed makes us drunk-drunk so much so that we hunger for the true refreshment and fulfillment that comes from a self-giving act of love.

What fascinates me about this story is that the Messianic community-the Church doesn't require that we know someone in order to serve, neither are we required to speak the same language in order to express our true feelings-even a piece of tissue paper can express our deepest thoughts. And for all her faults, the Church more often than not makes some good things happen. Amen.