

Day of Pentecost Week – Year C – May 26, 2010
Acts 2:1 -21; Psalm 104: 25-35, 37; Romans 8:14-17; John 14:8-17
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“Everybody has a soul. Everyone has a part inside of them that is not available for rational thinking or for understanding much of anything, part of ... the soul [that] is touched so often by music or by tragedies where people’s hearts are broken. That’s a good thing because culture is so adamant that you keep your act together,” says author Annie Lamott. Today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles is a delightful example of culture demanding that we keep our act together! For example, that we resist the urgings of the Holy Spirit to proclaim our Lord Jesus boldly and confidently. However, as always, it is God’s timing that is perfect. And even today, God’s incredible grace means that God’s people may not be who *we* think they should be. The continuity of God’s plan of salvation is so often revealed to us in surprising ways.

The timing of the coming of the Holy Spirit described for us in today’s reading from Acts is also perfect and elegant in the way that only God’s timing can be. Jerusalem is full of immigrants, who have come from the cities and towns all around. These are the people of the Diaspora, or dispersion, whose native languages are many and varied. They have come to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Shavuot, the third of the major Jewish festivals. It is the feast of first fruits given to God from the harvest. We will get to Peter’s sermon in a moment, but for now let’s note that the precursor to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that Joel prophesies is a prophecy of an abundant harvest. Shavuot is also the celebration of the giving of the Torah to God’s people, especially the Ten Commandments given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. Luke certainly is aware of the symbolic universe of his own time and place. The prompts of his text draw to mind common knowledge and beliefs, conjuring familiar and beloved images, and the stories of God’s people. Since you and I are not so familiar with Luke’s symbolism, and because we not as steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures we have to work a little harder at understanding what lies beneath the simple words of the text.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at this Pentecost brings to mind at least four related aspects of Jesus’ continuing ministry. It is harvest time, which for a largely agrarian society means time to get the laborers into the fields. In Luke 10:2 Jesus has spoken to his disciples about this very matter – in spiritual terms, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.” There is no doubt that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the festival of Pentecost results in a dramatic increase in the number of witnesses who will go forth into the mission field bearing the good news of Jesus Christ. This fulfills Jesus’ prayer, and affirms God’s promise in Christ’s incarnation.

Secondly, the Holy Spirit is poured out on all the followers of Christ, who have gathered together according to Jesus’ command. Not just the eleven disciples, but women, men and children equally and alike are given the gift of speaking in one of the native languages of God’s people. This is not the gift of tongues commonly called *glossolalia*, which requires someone gifted in the interpretation of tongues to provide insight and translation. This gift is the ability to speak in a known language, but one that is foreign to each of those who speak it. Early in the Hebrew Scriptures, we read about the tower of Babel, a time when the arrogance of the people of the world led to the division of languages and the dispersion of the nations. This is followed by a prolonged period of suspicion and misunderstanding amongst the nations of the world. At Pentecost, we may understand the proclamation of God’s Word in all the languages of the nations as a new beginning of unity in Christ, and continuity in God’s plan of salvation. A cacophony of voices because a chorus of praise. Babble becomes communication. If this was a pure reversal of Babel we might expect a single unifying language, but that is not the case – at least at face value. There are multiple proclamations in all the languages of the world. Yet, beneath it all, at the very heart of God’s plan of salvation lies the unifying language of love. Love of God, love of Christ Jesus

our Lord, and in the midst of our glorious diversity as members of all the nations of the world, we share a deeper and more profound unity as members of Christ's Body. All, so that the whole world may hear and understand the Gospel message, each in our own language. Jesus, the Word and God incarnate is *the* Word for the salvation of the whole world.

Next, since this is the feast celebrating the giving of God's Torah we have to consider the distinct possibility that the gift of the Holy Spirit to Christ's followers marking the birth of the church is somehow connected to the long ago events marking the birth of God's chosen people. Throughout the sister texts of Luke-Acts, the author takes great pains to express the connection and continuity of Jesus' life, death and resurrection as the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures. God's revelation recorded for us in the Book of Exodus, and the giving of the Law is the symbolic birth of the community of God's chosen people. In this first Pentecost, we understand the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as God's faithful promise of redemption for all God's people. That redemption is found in Christ Jesus, and is brought to every corner of the world in the birth of this expanded community of God's people – the whole Body of Christ. Jesus taught that the Law was not meant to build a boundary around God's people, to separate and divide through petty human-made rules and regulations or to become inward looking and insular. Instead, Jesus showed us how the Law was meant to guide God's people as faithful light bearers to all the nations. All is fulfilled in loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves, welcoming all to God's table. We are called to share radical hospitality, especially with those whom society rejects, and live our faith declaring God's love through acts of compassion, mercy and self-giving.

In Peter's sermon, we have the inspired interpretation of the bewildering and astonishing events of that first Pentecost, a phenomenon referenced to the fulfillment of the prophet Joel's words. Politically, Peter's proclamation of the link between current events and Joel's prophecy is dangerous. All the people gathered in Jerusalem are under the rule of the Roman Empire. Joel also wrote his prophetic words during a time of occupation. Peter is therefore speaking of the ultimate overthrow of this and every worldly empire by God. Let's not forget the most recent events of Jesus' politically justified crucifixion, and His being a threat to the Emperor's rule. And let's not forget how God raises Christ to new and unending life, confirming that the real power behind all the thrones of the world lies only in God. God's expansive plan in the vast and sweeping history of salvation reaches its culmination in Jesus Christ. The promise of the gift of power given to all God's children in the Holy Spirit is so that the whole world may know of God's great deeds of power, and accept God's gift of salvation in Jesus Christ. God's steadfast faithfulness is true. God keeps His promises.

In her book, *Travelling Mercies*, Annie Lamott writes about her early life, her struggles with addiction and sexual promiscuity, bulimia and low self-esteem, and about being a single mom. Her life story, like so many faithful people of God, comes full circle by God's grace and perfect timing. At the age of thirty, she hits rock bottom, reeling from a recent abortion, and still struggling with alcoholism. Imagine her surprise when she finds herself hung over, but also in what she describes as the palpable presence of Jesus. A week later, she is drawn by the beauty of the music, into the vestibule of a Presbyterian church. It was the beginning of her new life as a member of the Body of Christ in a community of faith. Would we welcome such an unlikely convert? Are we surprised that God welcomes everyone who calls on the name of the Lord? Here's a final word from Lamott, "You are loved exactly the way you are by God, but God loves you too much to let you stay like this." The gift of Pentecost is God's charge to each one of us to speak the truth of the good news in Christ Jesus to everyone – no exception! No one is beyond God's love, grace and forgiveness. We proclaim Christ's name in love and humility, because we too are works in progress. We don't need to try and keep our act together, we just need to be faithful to the Lord, and be prepared for God's surprises.

Amen.