

A Better Spirit of Unity and Understanding

Acts 2: 1-21

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One of the challenges of being a preacher is living (struggling) with the scripture text for the week leading up to Sunday. The task of preaching requires that one prayerfully reflect on a sacred message that can inform, inspire and shape experiences of faith for the current day and age we live in— *this is no easy task*. Especially, in these earnest times that we live.

Perhaps like you, I'm weary from a week of hard news. This week my heart has ached for concerns both far away and close to my own heart. The news of carnage and massacre of lives lost from Gaza to Venezuela to Santa Fe, TX, (just outside of Houston) has left many of us speechless and further in distraught. The school shooting in Santa Fe was the 101st mass shooting of 2018— how much more can we endure?

Our scripture for this Sunday is the story of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2. Pentecost was a festival fifty-days following the Passover festival where Hebrew people returned to Jerusalem to bring offerings of their harvest and recall the passing of the message of God through the prophet Moses to the people of God. Jews from all over the Mediterranean world made their Pentecost pilgrimage to Jerusalem to offer, worship and pray.

Jesus' disciples were waiting in Jerusalem just as the resurrected Jesus had commanded them. Acts chapter 1 tells us that they were waiting together in the "upper room"— perhaps the same upper room where they had their last supper with Jesus the night before he was murdered.

The disciples were told to wait in Jerusalem for a very specific gift, the Holy Spirit.

Wait a minute, preacher, what exactly is the Holy Spirit?

One of my UCC clergy friends (Jimmy R. Watson) describes the Holy Spirit as the consciousness of God. That is, the Holy Spirit is the *awareness, presence and activity* of God among us. Another mentor of mine (Bob Utley), calls the Holy Spirit "the other Jesus".

In addition to those descriptions, The Holy Spirit as the consciousness of God or as the other Jesus, it's possible that the Holy Spirit was an evolution of the Hebrew theological hypostasis of (the personified wisdom of God "Sophia") as used in wisdom literature-- such as in Proverbs 3. Hebrew hypostasis was a theological construct for describing divine intermediaries between God and creation. (Ask for my sermon on Romans 8 if you're further interested in this Hebrew wisdom literature "Sophia" concept as related to the Holy Spirit).

Jesus explained to the disciples (Acts 1.8) that they were to wait for the Holy Spirit to give them "power" to be his "witnesses", starting in Jerusalem but also to the ends of the world.

Back when I was new to faith in high school, I was a part of a non-church sponsored gathering of a fairly diverse group of Christian students that would gather on Fridays at a friend's

home. There were 30 or more students from Methodist, Baptist, Nazarene, and Pentecostal denominations. A few of the students took turns in leading bible studies and reflections from week to week. Two of my close friends attended these Friday sessions. Chad was a Baptist like me and Bo was a member of a Pentecostal Church. I had known both Chad and Bo well before we all professed any degree of faith— *we were all a bit wild and untamed before we were religious.*

Bo in particular experienced a profound transformation when he began his faith journey. He was eager to share his faith and his Pentecostal understandings of being baptized in the Spirit— such baptism of the Holy Spirit talk was unfamiliar to both Chad and me in our Baptist understandings of faith. But, we were sincere in faith and desired to experience the Holy Spirit— if there really was anything legitimate to such an experience.

Bo was teaching one Friday about gifts of the Spirit and baptism in the Spirit— and all of this seemed good. He then gave an altar call as some churches do, especially in evangelical churches. Chad and I decided that we would support our friend Bo and we went forward to “receive the Holy Spirit”.

Bo had Chad and me take a knee and kneel down, and he then started to pray. Other students surrounded us and placed their hands on us and started to pray. We could hear whispers and even some students were praying in “tongues” (which sounded beautiful, but was not a normal experience in my faith understanding).

Meanwhile, Chad and I were kneeling, and after sometime our knees and bent backs and necks started to ache. I whispered to Chad, whose head was right next to my head, and I said, “*Hey Chad, do you feel anything?*”, Chad: “*nope*”, me to Chad: “*How long to you think we have to keep kneeling?*” Chad: “*Not much longer, I can’t kneel much longer...*”, We both then said “***Amen!***” and stood up and thanked everyone for their prayers.

I can’t say that I experienced anything personally that Friday early evening, as in being “baptized by the Spirit” in that experience, but now that I reflect back upon that particular experience I do think the Spirit of God was present among those students-- in that we were together seeking greater ***unity and understanding*** in our own faith journeys and in our relationships (fellowship) with one another— and isn’t that the fruit of the Holy Spirit? Better unity and understanding?

Acts 2.1 says that the disciples were together and of one mind.

I’m not sure if it’s the Holy Spirit that brings an experience of unity among diverse people, or if it’s the practice of being unified with one another that attracts the Spirit of God. Either way, I think it’s safe to say that wherever the Spirit of God is there is unity and understanding concern for the well-being of one another.

Also, too, the unity associated with the Spirit of God is not uniformity or conformity— we don’t lose our unique personalities or individual sense being. Rather, the unity of God is a unity of diversity— an “university”. I use the term “university” here not in the academic sense, but in the sense of an array of unique life experiences connected to one another— *a unity of diversity,*

where we complement the limitations of one another so that we can see one clearly and better as a whole rather than as solitary individuals.

Such was the experience in the stories of the growing church in Acts. They were from all over the Mediterranean world, each with different native languages and dialects, and yet they were united together in the inclusive and radical affirmation of the Spirit of God.

God knows that this world today could use some better loving unity.

The miracle of Pentecost was not that the disciples spoke in different languages as much as it is that they understood one another.

It's a miracle to be *understood, accepted* and *affirmed*.

It's hard work to understand one another. We usually seek to try get others to understand our positions rather than first understanding another. Importantly, Holy Spirit understanding starts with those on the margins.

People hearing all of the Pentecost Holy Spirit activity thought the diverse crowd was drunk, but Peter reassured them and said that it was only 9 in the morning! Rather, they were enthusiastic (full of God) and they were joyous to understand one another.

The onlooking crowd said, "aren't these Galileans?" The negative connotation for Galileans in that day and age was that they were "backwoods" and more primitive than other cultures and traditions. But here, in Luke's continuation of the Gospel story (Acts), Galileans are the marginalized and oppressed people that God initially shares this new (kingdom of God way) love and affirmation with at Pentecost.

A central point of Pentecost, in my mind, is that we often experience the Holy Spirit (consciousness, awareness and presence of God) when we practice unity and understanding of one another.

And, it's hard to understand one another. It takes great effort to see from another's perspective. We see and hear (and sense) "reality" through different eyes and ears. For example, note the difference in people that hear "Yanny" while others hear "Laurel", or when others see a gold and tan dress while you see the same dress as blue and black.

Unity and Understanding are acts of the Holy Spirit-- or perhaps, the Holy Spirit (the consciousness of God) is attracted to unity and understanding; either way, let us be filled with the Holy Spirit that we might pursue better unity and mutual understanding.

(Bonus: some thoughts that did not make the final cut for the spoke sermon on Sunday):

In Acts, the word for "fire" was of popular usage in the Greco-Roman writings of the day "as a metaphor for the physiological experience of prophetic inspiration" (The New Interpreter's Bible); that is, both the spoken words of the one prophesying (proclaiming the message of God)

and the one hearing and interpreting of God's message was an inspired exercise— as if both the communicator and hearer of the message were illuminated and empowered, figuratively speaking, by a holy fire— in our contemporary vernacular we might say that someone particularly gifted in an ability (speaking, singing, or whatever the ability) is “on fire.”