

“Blown by the Spirit to Serve”

A sermon based on Acts 2 and John 14:8-17, 25-27
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
And the Korean Church of Champaign Urbana
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Is there a word from the Lord? God’s people through the ages have longed to know that God speaks to us, that God remains engaged with us, giving us counsel, offering us wisdom, showing us love. And in those times when it has seemed that God was silent, the people of God have felt uneasy and uncertain.

The prophet Amos wrote that the word of the Lord was rare in his time, a time when the kings had become very bad. Just when the people needed it most, Amos was called to speak the words of the Lord.

After the last of the prophets, many, many years passed, and the people began to wonder when the promises of God would be realized. When would the Deliver, spoken of by God, come.

In the time of King Herod, a time of great suffering, when the kings were once again very bad, the people longed to know that there was a word from the Lord. And at long last that word came, but this time, in an entirely new way. This time the word of the Lord came in flesh. The very Word that had been spoken at the dawn of creation walked among us, bringing healing, wisdom and new life.

By the time we have heard about today in Acts chapter 2, the disciples were once again in one of those in between times. Jesus had told them that he would send an Advocate, someone who would explain all things to them. But seven weeks had gone by. Seven weeks and a day. Was there a word from the Lord? When would the helper come to help them understand?

For centuries, there have been explorers who have traveled worlds known and unknown. Explorers tend to be unsatisfied with settled knowledge or opinion. Rather than resting content with what is, they want to know what might be, what can be. Until the 1490s, people knew, they just knew that the world was flat, and that if someone sailed far enough, that sailor would find the edge of the world, and sail over it. Christopher Columbus didn't agree. Maybe it's best to say he knew better, and he was willing to take the risk to prove it.

Stephen Spielberg's marvelous film, *Lincoln*, captures the winter of 1864 – 1865, a time in which people knew, they just knew, that black people were inferior to white people, that slavery was a “kindness” to them, or at least fitting, given their “natural inferiority.” Of course, there were many who did not agree, like Lincoln and Thaddeus Stephens, and who were willing to take the risk of passing the 13th Amendment to grasp the chance to prove it.

Maybe someone will produce a fine film about that passage of the 19th amendment. Until 1920, people knew, they just knew, that women should not have the freedom to vote.

Until 1967, many people knew, just knew, that people of different races should not be allowed to marry. There were anti-miscegenation laws to prohibit such marriage. In Illinois, such a law was passed in 1829, but then it was repealed in 1874.

These are just a few of the things that people used to think they just knew to be true. Were it not for explorers, pioneers, of the Spirit and otherwise, these might still be things that people just know.

While my daughter, Susan, was studying at UWM, studying film in the Peck School of the Arts, she posted a video clip of inspiring images of travel, space travel in particular. The voice over is Carl Sagan reading a most Sagan-esque passage from his book *The Pale Blue Dot*, I think.

We were hunters and foragers. The frontier was everywhere. We were bounded only by the earth and the ocean and the sky. The open road still softly calls. Our little terraqueous globe is the madhouse of those hundred, thousand, millions of worlds. We who cannot even put our own planetary home in order, riven with rivalries and hatreds, are we to venture out into space?...For all of our failings, despite our limitations and fallibilities, we humans are capable of greatness.

By way of the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled, not for greatness, but for full humanity.

II

That is some of what happened on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit came down upon those gathered together, and it opened up their world. Where previously there had been confusion, the confusion of languages that had existed since the Tower of Babel, on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit opened ears and unloosed tongues so that everyone understood. Everyone heard in their own language. Confusion was replaced with communication. And it left them filled with fire.

The Holy Spirit began a work that day that continues today. It did things that would have been thought impossible, like enabling people from different nations and with different languages to understand the preaching of Jesus' disciples.

Over the centuries, we have come to understand that when the Spirit comes, the Spirit loves to mix things up. The Spirit unsettles our preconceptions. It pushes us outside our zones of comfort. It reminds us that all kinds of things are possible with God. And it sets us afire with unimagined possibilities.

All to say that we probably should be careful about praying for the coming of the Spirit. For when the Spirit does come, it is more than likely to throw you together with the kind of people you previously thought you could not understand. It will mix you together with people you previously thought you would never want anything to do with. And all for the sake of communication, maybe even communion.

For what does Psalm 133 tells us? “How good, how delightful it is when kindred live together in unity...for there the Lord bestows the blessing, everlasting life.”

Outside these walls, out there in our culture, we expect there to be places where such mixing is unwelcome. There are still many who want to deny that our basic humanity makes us all kindred of one another.

But not here, not in Christ's church. The Church is intended by God to be the one place where the distinctions that matter so much to the rest of the world matter not at all. The Church, through the power of the Holy Spirit, is the place where Parthians, Medes and Elamites come together. It's the place where Mesopotamians, Judeans, Cappadocians, Asians, Phrygians, Pamphylians, Egyptians, Cretans and Arabs, can all come together and hear the word

proclaimed so that they can understand it and respond in faith, and then sit together in the fellowship hall drinking coffee.

Here, there is neither male nor female. There is neither slave nor free. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, rich nor poor, right wing or left wing. Here we are all refugees, we are all immigrants. The citizenship that we have in the realm of God is never inherited, nor is it ever earned. It is a gift.

Sometimes we can forget that mixing such diversity is possible. We may talk ourselves into believing that it is not even a good idea. But the Holy Spirit will not allow us to forget for long. God's will is that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved, regardless of their differences.

It was true for the Church on the first day of Pentecost. And it remains the truth for the Church on this day of Pentecost. Thanks be to God.

III

So you will want to be careful about this business of praying for the coming of the Holy Spirit. I can guarantee that when the Spirit comes, it will move people to do some pretty risky things.

A recent film gives us a glimpse of this. "The Letters" is a movie about Mother Teresa and how she became the lover of the poor the world knows of today. The movie is based on the letters Mother Teresa wrote to her spiritual advisor, a priest named Celeste Van Exem.

The movie begins with Teresa already in eastern Calcutta, India. Arriving there in 1929, she would serve with the Sisters of Loreto as a teacher and head

mistress for almost 20 years in their convent school for girls. The school generally served the well-to-do daughters of upper class Indian families.

Her order, the Sisters of Loreto, was well established. In a variety of ways, her work was safe, and she would have everything she might need. I don't know if "cushy" is the right word to describe her position at that time, but for nuns in her order, she was in a desirable place.

About 16 years into her service at the school, she was looking through the iron bars on one of the windows in the convent school, when she noticed, really noticed, the poverty and the suffering of the poor just beyond the safe walls of the convent. She felt for the first time what she called her "call within the call." She wrote, "I was to leave the convent and help the poor while living among them. It was an order. To fail would have been to break the faith."

So began an odyssey that would last more than 3 years. She had to get permission from her superior, who had to get permission from the local bishop, who had to get permission ultimately from the Pope in Rome. When the permission came, she was granted 1 year of release from her duties to the Sisters of Loreto to explore this new sense of calling.

She first spent months at a hospital to get basic medical training. Only then did she move into the slums. You might think that the poor would have welcomed someone like her with open arms, but there was much suspicion. Most of them were Hindu, and she was Christian. They suspected that she was out to convert them. Threats were made, and when she was granted the use of an abandoned Temple by the local authorities, there was almost a riot.

But eventually, she earned the trust of the people. And it was very hard. In that first year, she had no income, and so, like the poor among whom she worked, she had to beg for food and supplies. She was lonely. She struggled with doubts.

I bet she wondered if she was crazy. In her diary she wrote this:

Our Lord wants me to be a free nun covered with the poverty of the cross. Today, I learned a good lesson. The poverty of the poor must be so hard for them. While looking for a home I walked and walked till my arms and legs ached. I thought how much they must ache in body and soul, looking for a home, food and health. Then, the comfort of Loreto [her former congregation] came to tempt me. 'You have only to say the word and all that will be yours again,' the Tempter kept on saying ... Of free choice, my God, and out of love for you, I desire to remain and do whatever be your Holy will in my regard. I did not let a single tear come.

And all of that struggle and hardship to work among the poorest, the sickest and the outcasts, to care for and serve those who were dying, who were left, even by family, to die in the streets. Among many of those were the Dalits, the ones the Indians consider “untouchable.” Even today, many in India and elsewhere in South Asia know, they just know, that the Dalit are untouchable, unclean, unworthy.

The Holy Spirit led Mother Teresa to see them as human beings, worthy of care and regard and dignity. And so she left the comforts of her convent school, with its order, and routine and widespread respect, to work and live among the poor in the slums, to do ministry that no one had yet imagined doing.

So many things we have thought that we just knew. But time after time, explorers, visionaries and pioneers, some of them blown by the power of the

Holy Spirit, have shown we don't know as much as we think, that our ways are not always the ways of God, and that God is not done making earth like heaven.

Is there a word from the Lord today? There is indeed. May the powerful and provoking wind of the Holy Spirit continue to blow among us, driving us out into the world to proclaim in our own words the good news of God's amazing love. Amen.