

New Beginnings—Hope
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Acts 2:1-21

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green
May 24, 2015

For 50 days we've been celebrating Easter! The 50-day period of celebration culminates today on the Day of Pentecost. Today is the day we celebrate the birth of the church thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit that transformed a timid and rather ordinary group of Jesus' friends into the bold apostles we read about in our New Testament. I love Pentecost! It's one church holiday that hasn't been co-opted by Hallmark and the retail industry so we can just "do our thing" over here without any outside expectations, cultural baggage, or swiping of credit cards.

Pentecost was an Old Testament festival before it took on its Christian character. It originated as a celebration of new life and new crops. Worshipers offered to God a gift of first fruits in gratitude and praise. Instructions for celebrating Pentecost are found in Leviticus 23, and include the all important stipulation of leaving some grain behind for the poor to "glean." Because the Israelites were once poor and landless and God had given the Promised Land to them, they, therefore, were always to consider their land, their trees, and their vineyards as a means of providing for the poor.

On the Day of Pentecost, so the story goes, God gave another game-changing gift: God gave the gift of the Holy Spirit to the disciples after Jesus had left them to return to the Father. This gift was also meant to be shared. This gift would prove to be good and liberating news for the poor, just as the Exodus from Egypt had been good and liberating for Israel.

We might think of today's reading from Acts 2 as the church's "creation story" and we might think of today as the birthday of the Church. Our collective birthday. Just as we revisit the stories of our founding fathers on the 4th of July, for example, to remember where we came from, so we revisit the stories of our birth on Pentecost, to remember where the Church came from and what we are all about.

The Holy Spirit is what we are all about!!!!

The church came into being as a result of a visitation or manifestation of God's Holy Spirit that unleashed in ordinary people an extraordinary set of gifts. Today's reading from Acts chapter 2 fairly crackles with power and electric energy! And I'm here to tell you this morning that the same Holy Spirit that blew through the room and filled those disciples with spiritual power—that same Spirit breathes on us and moves in our midst and offers us gifts to use for God's purposes.

Same Spirit. Same power. Same gifts.

Imagine, if you will, three lovely wrapped boxes with bows on top. Imagine them sitting right here on the floor before us. These are our birthday gifts from God because today is our birthday. Shall we open them? Yes, let's do. Let's open one gift at a time.

1) Off comes the bow. Off comes the top of the box. Hmmm. What's inside? Inside is the first gift of Pentecost: it is the gift of *hopeful speech*. It is the gift of *having something good to say* to a world that is drowning in bad news.

Let me tell you a quick story about hopeful speech. The hero of the story is my son Daniel's second grade teacher, Mrs. Singh. Once a year Daniel's elementary school would invite parents to come to school to visit the classrooms and observe the teachers and students in action. I always took advantage of this opportunity and I always learned an enormous amount from watching the teachers in action. But of all Daniel's elementary school teachers, I think I learned the most from Mrs. Singh.

She was tiny—barely taller than the second graders in her charge—but that didn't matter. Here's what mattered: the way she spoke to the children. She had complete control of the classroom—which meant that all 30-some children were learning steadily—and she accomplished this without yelling, threatening, or ever raising her voice. I sensed an aura in Mrs. Singh's classroom and for the longest time, sitting in the back observing, I couldn't figure out what it was, and then I did figure it out. The aura was created by her words and tone of voice. The secret was in how she spoke to the children, and the secret of that was that *she never missed an opportunity to give a genuine compliment*.

"Great job table two for getting started quickly on the project," she would say.

"Great job table five for remembering to push your chairs back in," she would say.

"Great job Daniel for this, great job Sammy for that, great job Molly for something else.'

None of it was empty praise. Every compliment was for something specific. The children flourished in this context where what they heard wasn't a steady diet of "don't-do-this" and "don't-do-that" but was instead a steady diet of "here's-something-specific-that-you-just-did-that-was-great."

Mrs. Singh was in her early 30s when she died of leukemia just a few years after Daniel had her as his teacher. That makes my one day in her classroom even more precious. She was my teacher, too.

The Holy Spirit swept through the room on the Day of Pentecost and gave the disciples something good to say. They burst out the doors and into the streets with words of hope for a hurting world. Words that strengthen. Heal. Educate. And build up.

They spoke about God's deeds of power with special emphasis on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. They spoke in a way that made it possible for their message to be heard and received by others. "How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" (Acts 2:8) the listeners marveled amongst themselves. It was a miracle of teaching and learning to rival the classroom management skills of the remarkable Mrs. Singh.

The first gift of Pentecost, that we've now opened together, is the gift of *hopeful speech*. May the Holy Spirit breathe on us the courage to speak of what we know to be true—and so offer a word of hope to our neighbors in Bloomfield.

2) Now for the second of our birthday gifts. With our imaginations let's unwrap the second gift: off comes the bow, off comes the lid. And the second gift of Pentecost is the gift of *listening*.

Yes, the Holy Spirit swept through the room in which the disciples were gathered on the Day of Pentecost and sent them out somehow able to speak in full paragraphs about the awesome deeds of God. But, let's face it, anybody can talk until they're blue in the face and the talking can go in one ear and out the other.

Without gift Number 2, gift Number 1 would be useless. Just as the Holy Spirit gave the disciples *something to say* on Pentecost, so the Holy Spirit gave passersby *the ability to listen*.

The story goes into exquisite detail about the listening and about what a miracle it was. There were Parthians, Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia and so on, a total of 15 different cultural and language groups mentioned specifically, and all the people from all these, different language groups could evidently hear the core message.

A lot of us are lazy listeners. Sometimes we are so preoccupied with what is going on in our heads that we barely register what other people are saying. A lot of us have our minds already made up. We'll nod our heads to what we already agree with, and shake our heads to what we already disagree with. We filter what we hear and only take some of it as worthwhile.

When we re-read the church's Creation Story we are reminded that listening is a huge part of the miracle of Pentecost. We've got good news to share. We've got a story to tell. We've got words, words and more words for a hurting world. But how are we getting the word out? How do we present the good news in a way that invites further thought? How do we even get people's attention in the first place? How do we get our story to register? What do our listeners need from us? Do we honestly expect to do all the talking, and have that go well?

How are people communicating these days anyway? With social media changing faster than we can figure how to use it, it seems that text, photo and video sharing substitute for that old fashioned activity some of us used to call talking-and-listening to each other!

Churches are trying new strategies to get their voices heard. One of my colleagues in the field of media is teaching pastors to video record what she calls “90-second sermons” and post them on the internet and share them through social media as a way to engage the non-churched world and inviting further conversation or perhaps a visit on a Sunday morning.

What are we willing to try? How far “out of the box” are we willing to think to engage our neighbors whose tablets and smart phones offer endless distractions? We’ve got something to say! How we get ourselves heard is the more difficult challenge.

3) Our third birthday gift may offer some help here. The third gift of Pentecost, then and now, is the gift of *dreams*. When Peter got up to explain what was happening to the crowds, he quoted the Old Testament prophet Joel:

*In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18)*

Pentecost is a time for Christians to remember that we are at heart a bunch of dreamers. *We were born to dream*. We were called into being as a church to be visionaries—to prayerfully imagine together the future that God prepares and then to “put legs on” those dreams and visions.

As an institution grows and matures it’s all too easy to take our eyes off the dream. After all there are practical matters to attend to! We have to make rules, we have to build buildings and then take care of them. We have to manage money. We have to organize ourselves and choose leaders if we want to get anything meaningful done. We start programs, and they become traditions, and then we feel we must maintain those traditions come hell or high water, and before you know it institutional maintenance becomes the main thing and we’ve forgotten what it’s like to dream.

Pentecost is the day for Christians to remember that we are at heart a bunch of dreamers. The essence of church is not following rules and volunteering for jobs. The essence of church is living *by the Holy Spirit a life shaped around the dreams that God plants in our minds*.

The Walt Disney corporation almost has it right:

*When you wish upon a star,
Makes no difference who you are
Anything your heart desires*

Will come true.

*If your heart is in your dream
No request is too extreme
When you wish upon a star
As dreamers do.*

*Fate is kind
She brings to those who love
The sweet fulfillment of
Their secret longing*

*Like a bolt out of the blue
Suddenly, it comes to you
When you wish upon a star
Your dreams come true.¹*

It's a beautiful song! And it skirts the edges of what I'm trying to say in this sermon—our dreams *are* the most important part of us! But the message to children in the Disney song is blatantly untrue and bound to disappoint:

“When you wish upon a star...anything your heart desires will come true?” Well, no.
“Like a bolt out of the blue, suddenly it comes to you...” No again.

The dreaming that we do in the church is of an altogether different sort. We don't promise that people will get what they want if they only want it enough. That's wishful thinking and that's fantasy. The dreams we invite people to invest their heart and soul and strength and minds in are dreams of God's future invading the present. Dreams of God's love sweeping away injustice and replacing it with compassion. Dreams of God's power made perfect in humility, loving-kindness and acts of mercy.

The church invites people to dream of the world God is perfecting toward God's purposes and for God's glory. These dreams change us. We don't gaze out the window at night and ask for things to change magically. Instead, we get up in the morning ready to tackle what needs to be tackled, resist what needs to be dismantled, and build what needs to take its place, in order for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

In the Presbyterian church we emphasize that it is everyone's prerogative to dream and it is everyone's job to make those dreams real with God's help.

What we say matters. How we say it, so that others can hear, also matters. But the dreams that drive us, that fill our hearts, that kindle our passions, these matter the most.

As we continue through the discernment phase of the New Beginnings process, let us find our hearts singing with the spirit of God, our ears humming with the voice of the

God's Spirit speaking in a language that reaches deep into our souls and, when all is said and done, may we bring hope to our neighbors in Jesus' name.

To the glory of God. Amen.

~Ruth L. Boling

¹Ned Washington, Leigh Harline. "When You Wish Upon a Star," from "Pinocchio," Walt Disney Productions, 1940. <http://www.metrolyrics.com/when-you-wish-upon-a-star-lyrics-disney.html>