

John 15:26-27, 16:12-15
Acts 2:1-21

THE NEAR PRESENCE OF GOD

In her novel, *A Thread of Grace*, Maria Doria Russell tells the story of the Italian citizenry's efforts to protect Jews from Nazi persecution during World War II. As she reports it, at the end of the war 87% of the Jews in Italy had survived a vicious, relentless Nazi campaign to find and deport them – the highest survivorship in occupied Europe where typically only 10% of the Jewish population survived. While most historians ask, “What went so wrong in Europe?” Russell is more curious about “What went so right in Italy? That, for me, is the more interesting question.” What went right in Italy? According to Russell, the answer can be traced in the peculiar history of that unique country that has been the crossroads of cultures, merchants and armies over time that engendered a peculiar rejection of the notion of any kind of racial purity or superiority. (Timothy C. Diebel, *Biblical Preaching Journal*, Spring 2006, p. 28)

That reflection spurred my thinking as I prepared to preach on the experience of Pentecost as found in chapter two of the Acts of the Apostles. To be sure, there were many standing around observing this strange phenomenon, who asked themselves (as well as others close by) “What went wrong here in Jerusalem that we are witnessing these crazy Galileans speaking in other languages that are unknown to them?” Some sneered and suggested that what was happening was caused by the disciples being “filled with new wine” – in other words, the disciples were hitting the sauce early in the morning and, they were so drunk, they were talking out of their minds.

That's one idea, one possible explanation as to why those Galileans were speaking in the native language of every Jew gathered there in the Holy City for the festival of Pentecost from many countries of the known world. However, if we ask instead, “What went right in Jerusalem that prompted the Galilean disciples of Jesus to speak in other languages and tell about God's deeds of power, then we get an altogether different answer. When we ask, “What went so right?” we draw closer to the truth. And, in the process, we are drawn closer to the near Presence of God.

Simon Peter stood up, spoke out, and set the record straight. He informed the crowd “these people aren't drunk as some of you suspect. They haven't had time because it's only 9:00 a.m. in the morning. No, this is the fulfillment of what the prophet Joel had announced would happen: ‘In the last days,’ God says, ‘I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people: Your sons will prophesy, also your daughters; Your young men will see visions, your old men dream dreams. When the time comes, I'll pour out my Spirit on those who serve me, men and women both, and they'll prophesy.’”

There is the correct answer to the question, “What went right in Jerusalem?” Joel's prophecy and Jesus' promise that the Spirit of God would come to God's people had been fulfilled! The Holy Spirit, sent from God the Father and the Son, is the near Presence of God or “God in the present tense” as some have said; and, the gift of the Holy Spirit, in turn, gave birth to the Church.

In John's Gospel, Jesus said, “It is to your advantage that I go away (i.e., when Jesus ascends to heaven), for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7). The advantage to the disciples, then and

now, was this: when Jesus was present with them, he was limited (like all other human beings) to space and time; in other words, when Jesus was in Capernaum, he couldn't be present in Jericho or Jerusalem or anywhere else at the same time. However, now, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, the presence of the risen Christ was/is experienced in many different ways, in many different places, all at once.

There are several things to note about the experience of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which is described by Luke in Acts 2. The Spirit of God came in power and filled the disciples with that very same godly power. By the way, the word power in the Greek is *dunamis* and from that we get our English word "dynamite," which is explosive power! Simon Peter stood up and spoke boldly and in a loud voice. This was the very same Peter, who stumbled and bumbled his way through most of the Gospel accounts, who repeatedly put his foot in his mouth, and who had denied even knowing Jesus three times! But this was the new and improved Peter! This was the disciple Jesus had envisioned when he looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Peter (which means Rock)... and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (John. 1:42, Matthew 16:18). Simon Peter, the "Rock," had finally lived up to his name – all because the Holy Spirit dwelt in him and the other disciples. The Spirit gave them power from on high and vanquished their fears!

The disciples didn't just speak in other languages, in the native tongue of all the Jews, who were present in Jerusalem on that day to celebrate the Festival of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit caused them to speak in foreign languages about God's deeds of power. They were praising God in many, different languages unknown to these Galileans. Here again is the fulfillment of scripture. After all, when the prophet Joel said, "In those days I will pour out my Spirit and they shall prophesy," the word *prophesy* doesn't mean to predict the future or to give social commentary on the politics of the day. Rather, in this context, prophecy means what it usually does throughout most of scripture: to speak forth the Word of God, to stand up boldly and declare God's mighty works. And, in that way, Peter and the rest of the disciples carried out God's will and Joel's vision.

The remaining verses in Acts 2 inform us that Peter, filled with the near presence and power of God, went even further and witnessed to Jesus of Nazareth (God in human flesh), "who was crucified, but God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power." Then, using scripture, Peter testified how "Jesus was the Messiah, and now, both the Father and the ascended Lord Jesus have poured out the Holy Spirit that you both see and hear." Upon hearing the Good News of the Gospel that day, some three thousand persons were added to the Church and they all "spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. Consequently, day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

I mention the entire account of Pentecost because I hear in Acts 2 the very basis of our Mission Statement, which is to "**Share God's love, embrace our neighbors, nurture each other.**" Notice how God's Spirit of love was poured out on the disciples and, what was the first thing they did? They spoke in other tongues about God's deeds of power; they shared God's love with others. Speaking in the native languages of the Jews from Parthia, Elam, Mesopotamia, Cappadocia, Asia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, Cyrene and Rome (to name a few), the disciples embraced their neighbors, near and far. As

those foreign Jews responded to the Good News of Jesus Christ, they joined in the close fellowship of believers and, together, they nurtured each other.

As we strive to live out the Mission Statement of our church, it will amount to nothing but nine words set down on paper unless we acknowledge and receive God's gift of the Holy Spirit to give life to both those words and our commitment to them. On our own, we will perhaps make a half-hearted attempt at speaking them, believing them, and doing them. However, when God's Presence and power come near and dwell within us, then, and only then, all things are possible. We, as individuals and as a congregation of God's gathered people, can be and do so much more than we might otherwise settle for whenever we are receptive to the presence of God's Spirit at work within each of us and among all of us. When we open ourselves to the near Presence of God, God will fill us.

Furthermore, God will change us, transform us, and help us to grow more and more into the likeness of Christ Jesus. While the disciples spoke in many and various languages, the common denominator was that they spoke the universal language of God's love for all. When we are open to the Holy Spirit, love will shape how we relate to one another. Occasionally, we may sin and make mistakes in our dealings with each other, but eventually love will win out. Just as in Jerusalem on that first Pentecost, God's Spirit will continue to bring us together and make us one in faith and daily living.

The Holy Spirit also empowers us as we continue to reach out to others and serve in the name of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit came to those first disciples so that they could continue the work that Jesus had begun. And we are to do the same. We are not called here to share in some special privilege through the presence of the Holy Spirit, but to serve. That is the real sign of the Holy Spirit: service. And, that's why we have many different gifts of the Spirit – so that we can be the Church and thus be a channel of blessing to others in Jesus' name and for his sake.

This Day of Pentecost affords us the opportunity to get in touch with – or, to be touched by – the near Presence of God. We are tempted to live by our own agendas and to be in control. But, the dangerous thing about the Holy Spirit is this: we cannot control the living and most powerful God. We can only hope to align ourselves with God's Spirit and see where the Spirit will take us. Of this we can be sure: as we live and serve, guided by God's Spirit, we will be drawn into closer communion with God, with our neighbors, and with each other. And, our faith and our fellowship will be deepened.

The story is told of the time when Leopold Stokowski was conducting a dress rehearsal of Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*. Stokowski went through the work once with the several hundred singers and orchestra, tapped for silence, and said, "Well, I guess you know the notes well enough. But the spirit is lacking. I want each of you to sit down tonight with your Bible and read St. Matthew's account of the life of Christ. Try to grasp it all. Who knows – perhaps that message is just what our listeners need in a time of doubt and despair. Then let's come back to our performance and try to convey to our audience the meaning and inspiration of the sacred words." The singers were startled to hear this advice from the worldly, debonair Stokowski. But they did as they were told. At the performance the next night they sang their hearts out. (Copied)

The Spirit of the holy God is near, closer to us than we are to ourselves. May we be open to the Holy Spirit and receptive to the people and places the Holy Spirit will lead us in order to "share God's love, embrace our neighbors, nurture each other" – all to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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