

Pentecost C. May 15, 2016. Acts 2.

Today is the day of Pentecost, which always falls fifty days after Easter. It is the day that we celebrate, mark, remember, and try to live into the story of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the early church. After his resurrection, Jesus spent forty days popping up all over the place, teaching his disciples a few more things, cooking them breakfast, and probably doing other stuff that didn't get written down. Then after forty days he takes off and tells his followers to hang tight, because he's sending something new: the gift of the Holy Spirit. They wait ten more days, and then the second story we read this morning happens. When I think of Pentecost, I think of new life, of empowerment for ministry, of the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and of a joyful, exuberant expansion of who counts in the body of Christ, from the small crowd of the early disciples to the vast throng that came to the faith after Peter's sermon.

We took a stab at showing these Pentecost themes in this morning's liturgy. As you may have noticed, we read the Acts reading this morning in many different languages. Our goal wasn't to reenact the day of Pentecost, because liturgy is not a series of historical tableaux. Our goal was to remind ourselves of the reality that God's Spirit comes to all people by means that folks can understand, that God is not the exclusive property of the Episcopal church or of Oak Park or of right-thinking people who share our tastes in books and music and sports teams. God speaks to folks in many languages, and the languages, practices, and communities that God uses to save you and me are not the end of the story.

[The children opened our service this morning] not as an exercise in cuteness, but as a demonstration of the Pentecost principle that all of us are empowered by the Holy Spirit to serve, to lead, to be Christ to each other and the world. It was a reminder of the prophecy from Joel that Peter quotes in his sermon in Acts: In the last days, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young folks shall see visions and your old folks shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy." What Peter is talking about and what Pentecost represents and what God is still doing is a scandalous expansion of who God uses to speak the truth. Of who the ministers bringing God's love to the world are.

And there are two sides to that. First and perhaps more scarily: we are included in that expansion. Yes, gasp, we're the folks on whom God is still pouring the Spirit, scandalously, recklessly, with abandon. As unlikely ministers as we are, with our lives all a mess of course, and our faith all woven through with doubt and apathy, and our schedules too full and our bones too tired, we're the people God is inviting to spread God's love to the world. I'm not saying that we should be accosting strangers (or even more uncomfortably, friends!) to find out whether they have accepted Jesus as their personal savior. But I am saying that whatever it is that brings us here, whatever it is that is saving us, we are called to share that, we are called to risk looking like fools for that. Peter's sermon begins by assuring the crowd that he isn't drunk—and if we aren't every now and then given a quizzical look because we've taken a risk for the sake of those around us and for God, then we aren't living in Pentecost.

So that's one side: God has poured out God's Spirit on us and we ought to be doing things out of love and in the inspiration of that Spirit that every now and then look

just a little bit foolish—things that just might get us into a little bit of trouble. But there's another side to this constantly expanding group of people who are empowered to speak the gospel: we're not the only ones. It is of course a great challenge to be called to speak, but it is perhaps an even greater challenge to be called, as we are, to listen.

Even if we just stick with the disciples and small group of friends who were hanging out together on the day of Pentecost, we have a motley crew of folks who don't seem like the likely ministers of God. In Jerusalem, a city chock full of priests and scholars, the first messengers of God's new work are a group of fishermen, women in a society that gave women little voice, traitors, political malcontents, and hangers-on whose leader had just been executed. And they looked drunk. The first folks experiencing Pentecost are not the folks we'd expect to have much to tell us about ultimate reality. It's a miracle that they spoke in tongues, but it's also a miracle that anyone bothered to listen.

Yes, Pentecost reminds us of the amazing work that we are called to do—to share God's love with the world, I mean, can you imagine a cooler or stranger thing to do? But it also teaches us that we are called to listen for God's voice coming from places where we wouldn't immediately expect. The Spirit that began this stage of its work among ancient fishermen, women, and political oddballs like Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector continues its work far away from the towers of respectability and prestige.

This principle of Pentecost has wide-ranging implications. The Spirit is being poured out on all kinds of folks—not just the ones we'd like to hear from. I wish that I could learn everything God wants to tell me from reading Shakespeare and detective novels, but I'm afraid that Pentecost suggests that we will also need to listen for the Spirit in my in-laws, in your boss, in the folks who come to the church during the week looking for a little help for gas money, in that uncle with those politics who keeps showing up in these sermons since the primaries started. These are individual examples, but I'll close with a corporate one.

Some of you may be thrilled and some may be dismayed to learn that some folks in St. Christopher's have been trying to work toward dismantling the invisible barbed wire border that runs down Austin Blvd. It's been a complicated, slow, decentralized effort that essentially boils down to trying to make friends in Austin, our nearest neighbors to the East. Because of course loving your neighbor is one of those things that comes up quite often in Christian life. As I have watched and occasionally participated in these efforts, I've become at least tentatively convinced of something: a friendship between St. Christopher's and Austin can't begin with us saving them. It has to begin with us listening as the Holy Spirit speaks to and teaches us through folks in Austin. Listening there for the Spirit is not just the best means of forging relationships, it is also a requirement of being faithful to God. Because it turns out that the greatest challenge of Pentecost is not accepting that we are called to share God's love with others, although that's true; it's accepting that folks whose lives are very different from ours are called to teach us also about God's love, and we as individuals and as a community are called to listen and to learn. Amen.