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Sermon Pentecost June 9, 2019
First UCC

Acts 2:1-21 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. 5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 13 But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." 14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. 16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 17 "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. 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. 19 And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. 20 The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. 21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Sermon

Happy Pentecost! As one of my colleagues said, "Pentecost! [its] that liturgical holiday when even the most non-emotive and undemonstrative of Christians acknowledge that God as Spirit moves, shakes, shimmies, ...shouts in many voices, and makes a scene."¹ Or, as my spouse Jon, says, "The day when *long* time church goers wear red and *first*-time church goers ask, 'What in the world is going on here?'"

A little background. Pentecost is a word meaning "fiftieth." It's celebrated 50 days after Passover. It was, and is, a Jewish festival celebrating both the spring harvest, and the giving of the 10 Commandments at Mount Sinai. The Christian tradition celebrates Pentecost 50 days after Easter, and what we celebrate is based on the story from the book of Acts, chapter 2, that Brad narrated to us.

Pentecost is referred to as the birthday of the church, but it is not an insular, church-y holiday. It has always been about celebrating God's presence in the world. We celebrate God's Spirit moving the people long ago, yes, and we celebrate the Spirit still moving among us today. But perhaps celebrate is the wrong word. Because when the Holy Spirit shows up, she messes with our maps and guideposts and sometimes we can't tell which way is up and which way is down.

As we heard, about 120 disciples were gathered in a house on Pentecost, probably at some pre-festival team-building retreat. Then there's a giant rush of wind, and God's Spirit

¹ Rachel G. Hackenberg, "Pentecost without Fire,"

<https://revgalblogpals.org/2016/05/10/revised-common-lectionary-pentecost-without-fire/> May 10, 2016, accessed June 3, 2019.

sweeps through and sets their tongues on fire, which is to say, they were all speaking different languages.

To say that something new was happening is an understatement. When the Spirit of God whirled in, they were able to see that something new was possible. That with God, they were capable of more than they thought. That the future wasn't set. This act of wind and fire and miraculous speaking of foreign languages allowed them to feel real possibility, and hope.

Then all of the other devout Jewish people who had come to celebrate Pentecost in Jerusalem hear the raucous coming from this house. And they were baffled, because they each heard someone speaking in their own native languages about God. But it's not hearing their own languages that baffles them, it's not what they're hearing about God's deeds. It's not that God's Spirit gusted through. After everything thing that happened, the most surprising part is that that at the center of such a sophisticated, linguistic, Spirit-filled event are....*Galileans*.

You see, much like we do with some people, this crowd that had gathered from all over, in Jerusalem, and no matter where *they* were from, they were pretty certain about *Galileans*—who they were and what they were capable of—which wasn't much.

But thanks to the Holy Spirit, suddenly the things they were sure about aren't certain. And there's room for hope and possibility. For Galileans, *and* for people who think they know about Galileans. No one saw that coming—but that's how the Spirit works.

Who are the Galileans in our own lives? In a culture in which there is disconnection and even contempt, who are the people we think we are certain about? Who are the people with whom we avoid contact at all costs?

Years ago at a church where I worked, I attended what seemed like a typical staff meeting. I sat around a table with 7 other people, going over things like the church calendar, building use requests, upcoming events, etc. It seemed like we were about done, when my colleague, another pastor, said, "A Spanish-speaking Pentecostal church wants to rent space in our church so they have a place to worship. How does everybody feel about that? Does anyone have any reason why they shouldn't?"

The feeling around the room was neutral and genial among the staff. "Sure!" everyone said. "Everybody needs a place to worship. Why *not* here?" It was a surprisingly easy and unanimous decision. No one asked questions. But I *confess*, my first *thought* was, "Spanish-speaking? Awesome. Pentecostal? I don't know. Do they ordain women? What about LGBTQIA folk? Don't they require a person to have had a Pentecostal moment where the Spirit descends upon them to be a member?" But I didn't say any of that. I was surprised and thought it strange that no one on our staff of 8 besides myself had taken any issue—which might have been a Spirit-moment in itself. So I remained quiet. Which also might have been a Spirit moment!

So the Pentecostal church, began their services in our building every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday evening. They were a small, 20-member church. They were always kind and respectful of the space. I'd have evening meetings and would walk past their worship space to see them taking turns speaking into microphones with closed eyes and open hands, seemingly calling upon or filled up with the Spirit. I would see them praying, all standing clustered together, laying hands on one another, praying intently in almost an otherworldly way. It was interesting. Things seemed fine.

Then one Wednesday morning at church, I heard loud, frustrated, incredulous voices. They were coming from the big multipurpose room that was used for choir, children's faith

formation, youth games and more. The voices were the Children, Family and Youth Ministers, who were upset. “Someone got in here and put grease on the walls! There are hand prints everywhere!” “Who would have done that? Who was messing around in here? Who could’ve gotten in the building to do this?” “It seems like something kids would do but these hand prints are big. Was this teenagers?” “Will this even come off of the walls?” “What is it?”

It was a mystery. Now, just before this, a church window had been broken by local kids who had stolen of all things, bags of potato chips. And while it wasn’t out of the question, this kind of vandalism seemed somehow strange. So our staff ran through who had used the building. My colleague went to make phone calls.

A few minutes later, with the staff still dismayed, my colleague came back to stand in the doorway. “It was the Pentecostal church,” he said, “they were praying for our congregation. They feel so thankful to use our space, they wanted to pray for our ministries and anoint the walls of the church. They said they’re really sorry. They feel really bad, and said they’d come clean it up right away.... I told them not to worry about it, and said that we’re grateful,” my colleague said.

It didn’t take much to clean up. And for years after that, as a staff, we laughed at our overreaction to the “greasy” walls that had actually been a blessing, a gift. The Pentecostal church’s faith sparked something beautiful and meaningful in us. Their anointing our church walls was like the Spirit rushing through. Something was happening. The Pentecostal church’s blessing opened a possibility in us. Their blessing helped us remain curious and committed in our relationship with them.

As a result, over time, we became more than roommate churches. Despite obvious theological differences, we prayed for each other’s ministries. We exchanged phone numbers, in case either of us needed something. We learned more about each other’s stories. While they were literally speaking English to us and we were not speaking Spanish to them, in other ways, it was as if we started to speak each other’s language. It was as if we had all been inspired by the rushing of the Spirit.

Have you ever had an experience like that? Where you were transformed by a person or a community that was uncomfortably different?

And “have we really grasped the import of what the Spirit did—what the Spirit *insisted on*—at the inaugural moment of the Church? To attempt [a new language] is to make oneself a learner.... To speak across barriers of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, culture, or politics is to challenge stereotype and risk ridicule. It is a brave and disorienting act.” And it is what God’s Spirit calls us to do in order to love our neighbor, and indeed love our enemies.

The Spirit calls us to love in humility and mutual vulnerability with no promise of welcome. When Jesus’ followers—the Galileans—were filled with the Spirit, and spoke about God in languages that everyone in Jerusalem could understand, and some said, “these are *Galileans* saying this?!” “[These Galileans] had to trust that no matter how awkward, inadequate, or silly they felt, the words bubbling up inside of them”—new, strange, scary words—were nevertheless *essential* words for that time and place.²

At this time of Pentecost, as the winds of change move in our congregation this summer, as they are blowing in your own life, it can feel like disruption and chaos, like the

² Debie Thomas sermon, “Words on Fire,” posted 8 May 2016, accessed 10 June, 2019, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/959-words-on-fire>

things you thought you knew are being turned upside down. But the Spirit is at work in unexpected places, and unexpected people. The Spirit is at work in us.

Don't be afraid of new people—to you they might look like Galileans, and you might look like a Galilean to them. Don't be afraid of new challenges, new environments, or of new opportunities. The Spirit is moving so that all shall be made well, even if it looks more like disruption and feels like dis-ease.

Maybe the Holy Spirit will disrupt us out of comfortable places in these pews for the sake of loving the world and the people around us, as hard as it is to love those who seem completely different. Maybe the Spirit will sweep us off of our heels as we take steps to encounter new people, consider new possibilities, and develop curiosity rather than contempt for others.³ Maybe we will be like those lucky people in Jerusalem long ago, who were urged “to suspend disbelief, drop their cherished defenses, and opt for wonder. [Those people who] had to widen their circles, and welcome those who seem so different.”⁴ Just maybe, we will be transformed in the Spirit too. May it be so.

³ Paraphrase of Jonathan Davis sermon, “Sunday, June 8, 2014 – Pentecost Sermon on Acts 1:1-21,” accessed 15 June, 2019,

<https://jdshankles.wordpress.com/2014/06/10/sunday-june-8th-2014-pentecost-sermon-on-acts-21-21/>

⁴ Debie Thomas sermon, “Words on Fire,” posted 8 May 2016, accessed 10 June, 2019,

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