

Going Public

Acts 2:1-21

May 15, 2005

Today is the fiftieth day after Easter. In the biblical story Jesus hung around with his disciples for forty days after his resurrection. During this time they talked and walked, ate and fished together. Then Jesus ascended into heaven, but he told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem, for they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit and filled with power.

It's been ten days since Jesus left. He was only gone three days the last time he left. The disciples are getting anxious. Jesus never said how long they should wait for this Spirit to appear. Jesus was always rather vague about when things would happen. He said things would happen "in God's time," which never had a date or time fixed to it.

The gospels give us hints that the disciples are cowering behind closed doors and living in fear during this time. After all, their leader has been executed and they are marked as belonging to an unpopular camp. But finally on the day of Pentecost the promised Holy Spirit does come. It comes with such a gale force that it blows the fear right out of the disciples. It comes as fire and sets the disciples aflame with such passion and enthusiasm that they burst out of the room where they are hiding and spill out onto the streets to share their life-changing experience of Jesus.

There are crowds of people in Jerusalem that day, for the Jewish Pentecost is one of three major feast days in which the Jews are called to gather in the Holy City. It falls fifty days after Passover at the end of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest. It commemorates the giving of the law, the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Jewish pilgrims have come from their scattered places of exile throughout the Roman Empire to praise God for the first fruits of the harvest. Just as Passover became the setting for Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples, so the Jewish festival of Pentecost provides a spiritual setting for a new work of God among the followers of Jesus. As God was revealed through the law, now God is made known through the mighty breath of the Holy Spirit.

Acts names sixteen geographical locations from whence the people have gathered. They are likely descendants of those who had once lived in Israel, but who had been exiled when foreign nations seized the land. Jewish faith and practices have been passed along over the years, but the language spoken in the Temple could not be sustained at such a distance. They do not expect to be addressed in their local language.

Thus when each person hears the followers of Christ speak about God's mighty acts of power in their own native language, it is indeed a miracle. The tongues, as of fire, which rest upon the followers of Jesus, represent the various languages they are inspired to speak. They are given voice to speak so that all people could hear about "God's deeds of power." The Spirit of God goes public. It is taken to the street, to common ordinary people from every nation on earth. It is communicated in languages and via media that people on the street can understand. It's made available to all persons in ways that are meaningful and relevant to their lives.

On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit moved, and the men and women who had experienced the living and risen Christ came out from behind the closed doors that had sheltered their fear and confusion. They set aside egos and petty bickering and worry about what the future would hold. They put aside their jobs, their politics, their concerns about food and shelter. They put aside anything that blocked the Spirit of God, and they let it flow through them to all who would hear the good news.

They didn't become institutional bureaucrats or CEO's. They didn't become salespeople or fundraisers or even pastors. They became witnesses. They became storytellers, simply telling other people their experience of Jesus and what it meant to them. They talked of knowing Jesus, hearing his words, seeing him healing, and speaking a truth that had changed their lives. They became a spiritual force in their community, and as time went on, far beyond Jerusalem and Galilee. They simply spoke of their own experience and belief in such a way, with such energy and joy, that others wanted to connect to this powerful new life-force called God's Spirit. By the end of the day, three thousand people were baptized with water and the Holy Spirit and found new meaning in their lives.

When the Holy Spirit dawns upon us, we, too, are called to go public with our faith, to express in our values, in the choices we make, the deeds we do. We are called to be witnesses, to tell our own stories of how we've come to know Jesus, what a difference he makes in our lives, and how we've found meaning in his teachings.

Going public with our faith often begins with listening. We've got to listen to the Spirit's call, but we've also got to listen to the people around us. What is troubling them? What keeps them awake at night? What decisions are they facing? As we hear their concerns we can discern ways to point them to the source of meaning and guidance we have found.

One person was running so fast through life that he began knocking other people over on his way through and didn't even notice what he was

doing. He simply needed to hear the Spirit of God say, “Stop! Breathe! Breathe deep! Rest awhile. You don’t need to do it all; some of it will wait. Breathe! Care for yourself.” The tension visibly drained from his body as he stopped, breathed deep, and rested.

Tears flowed down her cheeks, words hindered by sobbing cries. Finally out tumbled the hurt, “They don’t like me. They won’t listen to me. They think my ideas are stupid.” The pain of rejection, feeling different, unwanted was powerful and overwhelming, blinding any ounce of worth and value. “You are a child of God. You are valuable to God and to me. Tell me the ideas you would like to share.” Confidence and energy build as she is heard and affirmed. She finds her voice once again in a haven of safety. Dialogue continues; ideas are enhanced; enthusiasm grows. “You have a right to speak and your ideas are worthy of being heard. You have found your voice. Go back, claiming the power of God’s love for you, and speak your truth.” She rises, standing straight and tall, beaming with confidence and hope.

A friend phones, his voice shaky with anxiety. He is worried about his child. Red flags keep flying up. He’s afraid the kid is headed toward crisis. What should he do? Talk to the child? Take him to a psychologist? Call the teacher? Ignore it and hope it will all disappear? Imagine his posture on the other side of the phone: hands tense with worry, eyebrows furrowed in a frown, feet bouncing nervously. After listening intently, a risk is taken. “Sometimes when I don’t know which way to turn, I look to Someone larger than myself for help. I find God gives me not only direction, but also courage and assurance. Would you mind if I prayed for you right now?” “Well, okay,” comes the timid response. An honest, heartfelt prayer for guidance for the parent, help for the child, peace for the family is offered. A deep sigh on the other end of the phone indicates a release of tension, leaving space for creative thought and energy to address the problem.

Sometimes it is not a word that people need to hear; it is simply a caring presence they need to feel, a warm flame of fiery love. Friday I spent time with the family of one of my husband’s longtime friends from childhood. Jim died last week at age 45 after an eleven year battle with multiple sclerosis. He was a wonderful, affable, intelligent man. The progressive decline of health led to many losses over the years. He lost his career; his wife left him; friends who couldn’t bear to witness the deterioration stayed away; once an avid hiker, he lost the mobility to walk; he gradually lost his ability to play the piano. As we planned his memorial service, his brother asked if I could help them understand why this horrible

monstrosity had fallen upon Jim. I didn't even attempt an answer; I simply listened to the accumulated pain of eleven years of loss and grief. We noted the small blessings that had woven themselves into the dark tapestry. I will certainly pray for understanding in the time before the memorial service, but I don't expect a grand revelation as to why evil happens. I will continue to offer my presence and my love, and I trust that others will also, hoping that we can be beacons of God's love and healing presence in the midst of great pain and in the face of much mystery. I closed our time together praying not for an answer to the question of why, but rather asking God to gently and tenderly hold them, to be with Jim's family as a loving, healing presence. I tried to open a window so that the rays of God's love could shine into their despair and grief.

If new life is experienced by others, it is not the gift of our words or our presence. It is given by the Spirit of God, which sometimes works through us, our words, our actions. Our role is to open the doors and windows of those who are locked away, huddled in fear, cowering in the shadows of despair. We seize a moment to bring them out in the open where they can experience for themselves the guiding light, the cleansing breath, and the purifying fire of the Spirit of God.

For that is what happened on the first Christian Pentecost: the hearts and lives of the followers of Jesus were opened wide for the Spirit of God in all its fullness to descend upon them, shower them with the blessings of God, and to commission them for the purposes of God.

May the Spirit of God fall afresh upon us, that we might be awakened from our comfortable pews, challenged to get outside ourselves and reach out to others, and empowered to tell the story of God's mighty acts in our lives and the life of the world. Watch out, my friends, for when the Spirit of God moves among us, She stirs us to go public for God!

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Come with the power of that first Pentecost.

Come as a mighty wind with energy to resurrect your church and your people. Cleanse us of impurities. Blow a refreshing breath of life into us. Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Come as tongues of fire, purging your church of falsehoods. Set us on fire with renewed passion for your mission. Empower us to speak and act in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ. Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Come, speaking to us in many languages, enabling us to listen and to hear one another. Teach us the universal language of love, that all your people might live in harmony. Instill in us respect and awe for each and every human life, with its gifts and imperfections and uniqueness. Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Come, descend upon hearts that are broken by grief, relationships torn by misunderstanding, spirits rent by anger. Make your presence known by a shared tear, a warm embrace, a word of forgiveness, a moment of truth, an openness to change. Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Come, enter into bodies racked with pain, souls disturbed and troubled, minds confused and muddled. Meet them with a gentle healing hand, comforting assurance, hope for the future and guidance along the way. Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Come, invade the battlefields of the world with a force that halts the violence and a power that converts enemies into friends. Change the courses set upon destruction and channel those energies into building God's realm of peace and justice. Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Come, renew the hearts of these your faithful people. Kindle anew in us the fire of your love. Fill us with the breath of abundant life, life with you. We yield ourselves to your will and your way. Come, Holy Spirit, come.
Amen.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church