

May 15, 2016
Pentecost Sunday Acts 2:1-21
The Rev. Tom E. King

In the book of Acts the evangelist Luke tells the dramatic story we just hear. Most of us are not quite sure how to take this story: it is quite foreign to our own personal experience.

It would be interesting if we could hook up our imaginations to some sort of imaging screen so we could see how our ideas compare to the pictures in our imagination of the folks sitting down the pew. What did the tongues look like in your mind? How big was the crowd? What were the sounds like?

Despite the oddness of the story, and without comparing our impressions with one another, there are some important messages for us to hear. The messages are not as exciting as tongues of fire, rushing wind, and numerous languages. But they are important messages anyway.

I would like to share a few messages I find in the story. If you think of others, please let me know during the social time after the service. I will be over by the oatmeal raisin cookies.

The first message I find in this Pentecost story is something that has always baffled historians, both those within and outside the church: how did the gospel message spread with such uncanny speed?

Jesus died around 29, Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica was in the early 50's, and Paul's correspondence ended with his death around 62. Each of his letters was written to a congregation that was rather well established and had a developing history.

The story about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus about how faith in him changed one's life – this story was told from person to person and in letters carried by hand so readily that believers and congregations were in Europe, Africa, and Asia Minor in a matter of years.

The Pentecost story about a miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit certainly gains credibility when we think of how far the gospel message spread in such a short time. Or, the other way around: it must have taken a miracle to get the word out that far that fast.

The second bit of wisdom I find suggested in the Pentecost account is that the message of Jesus is universal: his wisdom about the deeper life, his compassion for those who lived under enormous burdens, his certainty that God loves all people with a love beyond measure = this good news, this gospel, speaks to the heart of all who are able to hear.

St. Augustine said it well when he wrote that God has created us for Godself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in God. And from another thinker we hear about the God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person. Some attribute the saying to Pascal; I have always heard it attributed to Voltaire. Google doesn't seem sure which is correct.

But, what a beautiful image: a God-shaped vacuum, a God-shaped space, a God-shaped emptiness in the heart of each person, waiting to be filled by a conscious relationship with God. The story of Pentecost is testimony that only a deliberate relationship with God will touch that space. Everything else we strive to cram in just leaves us more burdened and more hungry.

A third thing I noticed in reading the familiar story of Pentecost: It seems that the universal message of Jesus and God's love is also highly personal. Each person heard the preaching in his own language. I say "his" because the custom was for the men of each to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. I have often wondered how much better off the world might be if it hadn't taken so long to wake up to the wisdom and gifts of women.

Well, in this particular audience in Jerusalem that day, each man heard the message about Jesus in his own language. The message about God's love and acceptance always reaches for those places in us that need it the most. The message is often met with obstacles, either those we create or that life has forced on us. But God' loving efforts are relentless. God doesn't bowl us over, but God does persist.

And the place we most need nurturance is the place God's spirit strives to meet us: it may be a need for forgiveness, a need for reassurance, a need for hope, a need for courage, a need for letting go and learning to trust. We have all these needs in common, but for each of us there is a need or two that are most prominent. There is a language in which we need to hear the good news of God's love, a place where that good news can help us along the way.

One final point: the folks who heard the preaching on Pentecost didn't just say "thank you very much," and keep that news to themselves. They were so transformed by their experience that they wanted to share the experience with others: people in their homes, their home towns, and people on the road as they traveled home. If you and I get a great deal on a new car, or if we find a dentist who is exceptional, or if we eat at a great restaurant, we are eager to share the news with anyone who asks. And if no one asks, we put the news on Facebook. Somehow, sharing our faith in the same way as we talk about other things seems awkward. I think the folks in the crowd at Jerusalem that day discovered that sharing their faith with others enriched those who heard and those who told. Maybe we should give that idea a bit more thought.

Well, that's what I got out of today's reading: the message of Jesus and about Jesus spread with speed that borders on the miraculous; the message of Jesus and about Jesus is a universal message of God's love for all people. This universal message of God's love for all comes to us in ways that are highly personal and highly helpful. And talking with one another about our faith is a valuable resource that we often neglect.

Amen.

Rev. Tom E. King