

“Perplexed at Pentecost”

Acts 2:1-21

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Day of Pentecost

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Peter’s such a know-it-all. He’s got an answer for everything especially the questions the crowd asks today. “How is it that we hear in our own native language?” “What does this mean?” These are good questions considering what has just happened to the apostles. Flaming tongues and rushing winds descend on the house, people can suddenly speak to each other in languages they haven’t spoke before, and they can hear each other in their native tongue. It’s the kind of thing that would provoke a lot of questions, questions that most of us have no experience answering.

But Peter the know-it-all – he’s got the answers. He goes directly to the Bible – to the prophet Joel – to explain to the crowd that these sorts of things have been predicted before. Joel predicted this would happen in the end times. The Spirit would be poured out on people of all ages. They’d all have visions and dreams. They’d all prophesy announcing the judgment day. Then everyone who called on the name of the Lord would be saved.

Peter’s got answers – a whole sermon’s worth of answers. 22 verses worth of answers compared to the crowd’s 6 verses worth of questions. Watching Peter it’s easy to come away with the idea that a) the most faithful Christians are the ones with all the answers, and b) all the answers are all found in Scripture. Which is disappointing since those kinds of Christians – the ones with all the answers - are also the most annoying kind. You know those people in your life who are so confident they know God’s will they hardly need the Spirit. They’ve got all the answers. I don’t want to be one of those annoying Christians. And it’s not just me saying that. 60% of Millennials today say Christianity is “judgmental.”¹ Not all of us are attracted to know-it-all Christians. But some are.

If you read on in the passage, Peter’s sermon leads to the baptism of 3,000 people. Not bad for the first post-Jesus sermon. And I have to admit, that one possible lesson for squeamish liberals worried about coming off as too preachy is, get over it. The church has truth to speak. Jesus has changed everything. We’ve been given power to speak that message. We’ve been given the power to announce this truth. It’s the power that Jesus promised to those early apostles – “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,” he said, “and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The first power given to the church is the power of proclamation – speech about God.

And yet how often do we keep our mouths shut about God for fear of be judged as judgmental, close-minded, holier than thou, a know-it-all? As if someone

¹ I think I got my date mixed up when preaching the sermon. 66% of Millennials

else wasn't going to step into the vacuum that we create when we refrain from testifying to what we know about God.²

My first year at Brown I was asked to come and give the annual welcome to our fine tutors in the Tutoring Program. It was my first year and people were still feeling me out so I had several gentle admonitions from folks not to speak about religion which seemed kind of odd since we are a church. But, I was told, our tutors are from all faiths and no faith. They are here for the kids not for faith. So keep the sermons to the pulpit on Sunday. So I welcomed everyone, saying something generic and vague about the gift of children and our responsibility to them, sounding more like a politician than a preacher.

The keynote speaker who followed me that day was the principal of one of the schools. She stepped up to the podium and proceeded to preach for about 10 minutes about how children are gifts to us from God. They've been entrusted to the adults of our city who are accountable not just to each us but directly to God. God will judge us by the wellbeing of these children, she sermonized, and we'd best not be judged and found wanting. By the end of the sermon, 60 tutors were fired up and ready to make a commitment to serve, buoyed by the knowledge that at least one person in the room believed that God was already at work in the life of these children.

I've since learned that if you're going to be the principal of a school in our city, in our state, and in our nation – where the adults in charge continually waver on our commitment to our children, you need the assurance that the power of God is alive and well in the world. You need to know that God's judgment is alive and well and active on their behalf. You need the courage that comes from faith that God isn't going to abandon you or the children you serve.

One lesson for those of us squeamish about claiming too much about God is get over it. But that can't be the only lesson since we know that everything that comes out Peter's mouth in the Bible isn't helpful or even true. By the time we meet Peter in the beginning of the book of Acts, Peter has already run his mouth several times before in the book of Luke when he should have stayed quiet.³ Up on the mountain for the Transfiguration, when Jesus's appearance was changed and a few disciples suddenly saw him speaking with Moses and Elijah (Luke 9:28-36). Peter runs his mouth about building some shrines but the text says he didn't know what he was talking about.⁴ Later, while Jesus was on trial and being tortured, Peter

² In the sermon I reference Dr. King's quote that of greater concern to him than the actions of "bad people" was the "appalling silence of good people." A child in the church had quoted Dr. King earlier in the service.

³ To those new to the faith or learning the Bible for the first time, most scholars believe that the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are 2 volumes written by the same author. We are intended to read these two books as chapters in the same story.

⁴ "Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah'—not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and

denied Jesus 3 times. He denied him with his speech. Sometimes our speech saves others. But sometimes it betrays and condemns.

The challenge is to speak when you've got truth to say and listen when you don't. Testify when you see God at work in the world and listen for God when you don't. Announce God's activity in the world when you know what God is up to, and stay quiet when you don't. And it's not just a challenge for Peter or for each of us. It's the challenge for the church.

It's not always easy to know when to do which. The Pentecost story seems to suggest that when the church gets it right, the church's mission gets bigger, the diversity of the church grows stronger. The Gospel heals more, transforms more, binds more people together. Twelve Jews suddenly find themselves with 3,000 converts from all around the world. Beggars live alongside the rich in community where everything is shared. Pretty soon, the Gospel is spreading to more people outside the usual boundaries – Ethiopian eunuchs join Centurion Gentiles who are included to promises made to Jews. When the church gets it right, you can see it in the mission of the church healing more, reaching more, transforming more, becoming more.

But when the church gets it right, we also have live with more tension, not less. In the Acts church, some are thrown in prison. Others stoned to death. There are internal arguments about who is really included, what really counts as correct faith, what boundaries need to be firmed up and which ones need to be thrown out. When the church receives the Spirit things don't get easier for the church. They get harder.

And maybe this is good news at a time in our city when the center is coming apart. The Spirit-led church doesn't shrink from the call to stand with others in the gaps. We join our prayers to our action with brothers and sisters whom the Holy Spirit calls together to heal us and heal our city in ways that are beyond our understanding.

It's happened before – in the 1960s when Marion Bascom and the goon squad took down Jim Crow in Baltimore. Imagine that – the church taking down an institution of exclusion built over centuries. It happened in the 1980s when BUILD turned a corporate enemy into an ally and built the College Bound Scholarship program that has sent hundred of Baltimore City school kids to college. It happened in east Baltimore in the past couple of decades when a few churches in Oliver pooled their money and talent instead of competing with each other and began a process that has renovated hundreds of homes, cutting the vacancy rate in their neighborhood in half, doubling the median income without forcing anybody out of their homes.

But I know that most of you want more than know-it-all testimony from someone sounding too much like Peter running his mouth. You want to see it for yourself? It's happened right here in this church – a congregation that almost closed by one vote in the late '70s. Look at us now. You want to see it for yourself? Watch

overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

the royal wedding yesterday and listen to a Black preacher who once ministered right down the street from us preaching about the power of love to overcome slavery and colonialism and war and violence – preaching it in the heart of aristocracy. You want to see it for yourself? Come to the BUILD action on June 6 and marvel at how hundreds of Latino immigrants from Highlandtown can find themselves in community with African-American residents from Sandtown and Upton and Harlem Park joining together with European Americans from Roland Park and Bolton Hill and Homeland calling on the Spirit to do again what it did on that day long ago when a handful of Jews prayed for power.

They prayed for the power to be God's witnesses – not because they wanted to deny the injustice of their times anymore than we can deny it in our own. The school shootings, the disproportionate violence leveled against Palestinians in Gaza and governments of Netanyahu, Hamas, and Trump that all take steps against peace. The murder that continues in our own streets unstoppable by a police department that few people trust. They prayed for the power to be witnesses, not to deny their challenges but to embrace the power of the Spirit in the midst of them. The Spirit that authorizes us to announce that the reign of violence is over and the time of peace has begun. To announce that the era of injustice is over and the oppression of the poorest of the poor has ended. To announce a different world is possible and real and close to us. They prayed for that power.

To anyone familiar with the Roman power of their time, their prayer must have sounded ridiculous, absurd, unbelievable.

But it came beyond their wildest dreams. It came.