

Sermon on the Day of Pentecost, A: Acts 2:1-21 and John 7:37-39
Graduate Recognition and Confirmation Sundays, May 11, 2008
Preached at Custer Lutheran Fellowship by Pastor Dave Van Kley

Could the World be About to Turn?

Happy are those whose strength
is in you,
in whose hearts are the
highways to Zion.
As they go through the valley of
Baca
they make it a place of
springs;
the early rain also covers it
with pools.
They go from strength to
strength.

I have never forgotten those words from Psalm 84, quoted at the funeral of a friend more than 20 years ago, a friend whose name was, ironically, **Bernie Rivers**. Bernie was the kind of person who could transform a dry, dusty landscape into a place of springs. A happy person, with a reservoir of inner strength. A person of faith from whom stories from the Bible and from life flowed graciously, straight from the heart.

Imperfect, he wasn't ashamed of his imperfection. He was generous to a fault. Fun-loving, with the kind of hearty laughter that carries all the way to Hill City. But he was also caring and humble, having endured some tough life experiences. Truthfully, when Bernie walked into a room, it was like someone had turned on the lights.

I was only a few years out of high school when I met Bernie and about a dozen other people like him at Immanuel Lutheran Church. I'd already met a lot of people **not** like them. I knew that I didn't want to get along on the strength of marijuana smoke or draughts of beer, like some of my friends. I didn't want to get along by working hard, making money, and buying a house in the suburbs, like some other friends. I didn't want to use religion to look down on people, like some of my parents' friends.

I'd lived long enough to know that the world can be a desert. And often, my own young heart felt parched. But when I saw what was flowing out of the heart of Bernie Rivers, I wanted some of **that**, whatever **that** was.

Today is not only Mother's Day and Confirmation/Graduate Recognition, it is also the third great festival of the Church year: Christmas, Easter, and **Pentecost**. Of the three, Pentecost is the least known and the least celebrated. Today's texts tell its strange beginnings.

It was Harvest Festival time in Jerusalem, which was maybe a little like the Fourth of July. A big holiday, lots going on. Lots of people on the streets. Jerusalem

was a colorful and cosmopolitan city in the first century. Jewish people from all over the known world—Africa, Asia, and Europe—came there to live. They spoke enough Aramaic or Greek to get by and maybe Hebrew, but these were not the first languages their moms had taught them while reading them bedtime stories or feeding them strained peaches. So when they came to Jerusalem, they lived in enclaves, the way people always do, with people whose voices they could understand, Arabs with Arabs and Egyptians with Egyptians, Parthians with Parthians and Cretans with Cretans. Jerusalem was a diverse place, but it was also, apparently, a divided place.

The disciple, all from Galilee, had also become “resident aliens.” They’d never left Jerusalem after the craziness of Jesus’ crucifixion and their encounters with him alive following the discovery of the empty tomb. Fifty days had passed and they were still waiting for something to happen. Suddenly, it did. Without warning or intent, they **all** began speaking. Through the open windows of their house streamed a great noise, the sound of many voices, like many waters roaring over rocks. The diverse peoples of Jerusalem converged on the house to see what was going on. Each of them heard in their own language the same message: **God is love**. God—who made the whole world, moon and stars, solar systems and galaxies, the whole universe—is love. God, who brought Israel up from the house of Egypt out of slavery across the Red Sea into the freedom of the promised land, is love. God, who became human, healed the sick and gave sight to the blind—is love. God, who gave himself so completely as to die on a cross, to wash away the sin of the whole world and draw it—**all** of it—into to his bosom—is love. God—whom the grave could not hold—is love. When they heard this—the young women and the young men, the old women and the old men, the Arabs and the Jews, the Europeans and the Asians, the poor and the wealthy—when they heard this, they wanted what the disciples had. By the time Peter finished his sermon, 3000 of them went down to the pool of Siloam and were baptized in water, in the living water, which is Jesus Christ, and which became the Holy Spirit welling up in their hearts and flowing out like a river to the world.

This was the same thing I saw and heard in Bernie Rivers, the thing I wanted.

Dear graduates/confirmands, you are entering the adult world. It is a world of marvelous diversity, but also a terribly divided world. Go to a big city and you’ll see Indian people, wearing the bindi on their foreheads, always together. Arab women with their distinctive clothing, speaking Arabic. Subway trains full of only African Americans. The wealthy living in the city center and suburbs, the poor relegated to slums, the Chinese in Chinatown. Lesbians and gays in their own section of the city, too, their own place to feel safe. The world is diverse, but divided.

In South Dakota, we institutionalize division, drawing boundaries within which native people live. We may enjoy the faces and the accents of Indonesians and Ukrainians who wait tables in Custer during the summer, but do we have anything else to do with them? They live apart, in quarters provided by the restaurants, speaking their

first languages. And here in Custer, there is a growing disparity between those who have much and those who have little. Diversity is a good thing, but division is not.

Some say that religion is the problem and they are partly right, for we religious people divide themselves along religious lines. Secretly, if not openly, we condemn those who are not like us. In truth, this is part of the reason people fly planes into buildings and the reason we have hideous torture stories like those from Abu Gharib. It is also the reason we have 10 or 12 churches in Custer instead of 2 or 3. This is the world we older generations have given you, my young friends. I am sorry. We are sorry.

But there is another way. Today's Pentecost texts tell us that the Christian religion was not meant to divide the world, but to bring it together. That's why Jesus came into the world. When the disciples spoke of God's mighty acts in him, people from all over the world were brought together. Some sneered, but many wanted what the disciples obviously had: communion with God, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

If you want what they had today, I declare to you that it is yours already. It was given to you in baptism; you claim it again today as you are confirmed (just be being here this morning). It flows from heart to heart, God's heart to your heart. "You are loved," it says. "You are God's. Every sin is forgiven. You need do nothing to prove yourself, for God has already proven your worth." This message flows from your heart, the singular you and the plural you, into the world, a river of love. Love that gives itself for a broken world to mend it, love that forgives every sin so that sin can be put away, love that embraces diversity so that all may be one. Love that goes to Myanmar and to Pine Ridge, Black Hills State and Custer High School. Love around the table at home.

Remember "show and tell" in kindergarten? Recall how excited you were to show off your mom or your goldfish or to introduce your favorite book? Your life is to be a showing and telling good news. Some Christians present their faith to the world as if they were playing "Compare and Condemn" rather than "Show and Tell." Not you. You are a conduit for the living water of the Holy Spirit, a humble expression of the loving Christ. Some may sneer, but others will say, "I want some of that."

Sometimes, my fifty something year old heart is parched. I say to myself and to God, "this world is a desert and it will never change." But then I look at young people, like you, and I think, the world may **yet** change. I think of Pentecost and the way God changed the world then. I think of the contemporary hymn, which asks, "Could the world be about to turn?" Do you hope for that? Do you pray for that? Do you believe that? Yes? Can you say it with me? Yes. Again? **Yes!**

Happy Pentecost!