

Readings: Numbers 11:24-30; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Acts 2:1-21; John 7:37-39

Grace to you and peace from the God of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit – blowing through all creation, bringing forth life that is forever new! Amen.

The author and church consultant Peter Steinke tells the silly story of watching two workers one day from a park bench. At first you're "baffled" by what you see, but then you can't help being "amused" as you see this charade repeated in front of you over and over. *One worker takes a shovel and digs a hole two to three feet deep. Meanwhile a second worker uses a shovel to return the same dirt into the exact same newly made hole.*

After you watch this odd charade repeated for several minutes, you finally can't help yourself. You approach the two workers and question them naively, "May I ask what you are doing? I'm curious." To which the workers reply rather matter-of-fact, that they are just "planting trees." "I dig the hole," says the first worker, "and Charlie puts the plant in the hole, and Chester here [pointing to the second worker] fills the hole with dirt." But it all becomes clear when you ask about Charlie and the worker explains (again with a simple, matter-of-fact tone): "Charlie is out sick today."¹

It's a story (you might even call it a parable), which sets the stage for this day of Pentecost. Everything has changed. But nothing has changed. The charade goes on as if everything is the same.

What's changed? Well, the disciples (and we too) are witnesses over these last seven weeks of Easter to God's resurrection, God's triumph over death – even death on a cross. *Death and the powers that be of the Roman Empire* have done all they can to stop or suppress what God in Christ Jesus is doing and the powers of death and empire have nothing left to do. New life springs all around the disciples, like a lawn that you keep mowing, but...

But the disciples (and we too) go on with the old charade, acting as if fear is still necessary, as if divisions are still real, as if death and the '*powers that be*' are still alive and well... and not hollow like an empty tomb.

¹ Peter Steinke, *A Door Set Open – Grounding Change in Mission and Hope* (Alban Institute, 2010), p. 49-50.

Enter the Holy Spirit in the central story for today the second reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

And it came, suddenly, out of heaven, a sound, as rushing, of a wind, mighty, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.

And there appeared to them, dividing/distributing tongues, as of fire, and they (those dividing/distributing tongues) sat upon each one of them.

And they were filled, all of them, with the Holy Spirit, and they began to speak, with different languages, as the Spirit was giving them, to speak forth.

We're not actually told what the words, what the message was that the disciples spoke. Not at first. In fact, one of the words that's used in the text at its root literally means, "to speak in a way that is *unintelligible* or not understandable to the listener."

And there's the paradox. It's not just that the disciples are speaking in languages that they have no right to speak (unless possibly they've been secretly doing Rosetta Stone in the upper room for these last seven weeks). No, there's a certain irony that words, which shouldn't make sense are starting to make sense. There's a certain irony that a rag-tag group of 'nobody' disciples with all their weaknesses and vulnerabilities are starting to take hold with a power beyond any strength the entire empire could muster. There's a certain irony that life is beginning to have the final word over death (and not the other way around).

Two years ago, I had the blessing as well as the privilege to be where our senior pastor, Pastor Tom, is now – on sabbatical. Almost two years ago as part of my sabbatical I was in Bogotá, Colombia visiting our sibling congregation *San Pablo Lutheran Church* where I spent about three weeks hosted by the pastor of *San Pablo*, Pastor Jairo.

And almost two years ago this day of Pentecost, I found myself sitting in the living room of Rosa (a member of *San Pablo*) along with half a dozen other members for a weekly bible study. Now, I'd been studying Spanish with members of this congregation, we'd been doing Rosetta Stone for several months leading up to the trip and I thought I was somewhat prepared. But as I wrote later in my blog: "I told Pastor Jairo that I understood about one-fourth of what was said at the bible study, but that was only because I [didn't] know how to say 'one-twentieth' in Spanish."

Still even as I sat through the bible study with nineteen out of twenty words entering my inner ear as only unintelligible sounds, still the one in twenty was enough to understand that the passage they were studying included the words of Jesus to his disciples while he was alive, the words explaining to them that he *came not to be served, but to serve*.

Again, I wrote in my blog, “Even if I didn’t understand much of the conversation, I am coming to understand these words of Jesus, [particularly] through the generous hospitality I have received” since my arrival in Bogotá.

Differences (whether language or political leanings, whether status of citizenship or state residence, whether religious or national or ethnic identity, whether gender or financial, racial or age) *differences need not necessitate divisions*. This is one of the first lessons of Pentecost.

Because the work of the Holy Spirit continues in today’s central story, the second reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

Now there were in Jerusalem, Jews dwelling, devout (God-fearing) ones from every ethnicity under heaven.

And as this sound came into being (the sound as rushing, of a wind, mighty), the great number (the multitude) came together and was poured together (stirred up in confusion), because they heard, each one, in their own manner of speaking (their own dialect).

And they were amazed, astonished (literally, they were “removed from a standing, a fixed position,” knocked off their seat; literally, they were “displaced”) and they marveled (they wondered), saying, “Look at this! Are not all of these who are speaking Galileans? And how do we hear, each in our own manner of speaking (our own dialect), the one in which we were born? ... How do we hear THE GREAT THINGS OF GOD IN OUR OWN TONGUES?”

Where does the Holy Spirit amaze you? Astonish you? How is the Holy Spirit dis-placing you, stirring you up in confusion? Literally *removing you from a fixed position, knocking you off your seat?* Where are you most likely to be surprised to hear the great things of God in your own tongue?

Things have changed with Easter. Everything has changed now with Pentecost. And nothing has changed.

Because, there's still work to be done. Call it, "the work of *planting trees*," if you'd like, during these spring days. But don't just shovel the dirt in a cynical, repetitive charade like those who sneer dismissively, "Ah! They're just drunk!"

Instead, listen to the tree planter. Listen to the interpreter Peter, the mouth of the Holy Spirit (dare we say, "the tongue of the Holy Spirit"?) who stands up in today's central story from the Acts of the Apostles.

"They're not drunk," says Peter. "For it's only nine in the morning" (as if that ever stopped anyone). Literally, Peter says, "It's the *third hour*" which (it's true) was about nine o'clock in the morning, but it was the time in the rhythm of religious life for morning prayer to begin.

Now is the time, Peter says. *Now is the time about which the prophet spoke*. Now is the time for God's Spirit to be poured out onto all flesh – preserving difference, but washing away division. Now is the time with the Spirit poured out onto you, to live the good news of Easter – death doesn't get the last word when the Spirit's at work. Destruction doesn't get the last word when the Spirit's at work. Division doesn't get the last word when the Spirit's at work. Everything has changed. Nothing is left to fear.

Don't keep living as if you're dying. Live as if you're already dead, drowned and washed in the waters of baptism. Live as if you've already died and the new life of God in Christ Jesus has changed everything.

There's an old proverb that says *the best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago, the second best time is now*.

It's never too late to roll up your sleeves and get to work when the Holy Spirit is in the air. Thanks be to God for the ways the Spirit works – stirring up in confusion, dis-placing, removing from fixed positions – blowing through people – like wind through the pine trees of the Black Hills – life that is forever new! Thanks be to God. And amen.