

“Embracing Diversity”
Sunday, June 9, 2019
Stouffville United Church

Pentecost – Genesis 11 and Acts 2

The word Pentecost is a Greek word meaning fiftieth day, specifically the fiftieth day after Easter. This is the day in which the Holy Spirit which Jesus had been telling the disciples about, shows up.

What did Jesus exactly say? In the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus tell the disciples, “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.” (John 14:25) And so 50 days after Jesus had left them, the Holy Spirit, as promised, arrives. And with spectacular affect.

Grace Imathiu, in a sermon preached at the 2016 Festival of Homiletics in Atlanta, Georgia, swept me away with her visualization of the arrival of the Holy Spirit on that day when the disciples gathered in the Upper Room: “For when She arrived, no one announced her entrance, she did not knock on the door. She came straight from heaven, with no apologies; no ‘peace be with you’.”¹

The Holy Spirit disrupts, she messes with the disciples’ predictability, with their togetherness and shouts as she pushes them out the door and into the street, “Get out there and spread the word that God is here for every person.” And they spill out into the streets and people think they are drunk with new wine for it was only 9 o’clock in the morning. But they are filled with the Holy Spirit. They will be the forerunners of the sons and daughters who will prophesy, of the visions that will be seen, of the dreams that will be dreamed.

Both Scripture passages this morning look at language. In Genesis, we hear, “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.” And God later confuses their language, so that they will not understand one another’s speech. In our Acts passage, we read, “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” And all of the people were able to hear the disciples speaking about God in their own language.

William Willimon suggests, “It is of the nature of the Holy Spirit to gather a crowd, quite a multitude from every nation, race, and region of the earth. The Holy Spirit promotes unity, brings diverse people together.” He continues, “Unlike the transfiguration of Christ (Mk 9:2-13), where the deep mystery at the heart of God is shown only to a couple of disciples, Pentecost is a revelation to a whole multitude ... Just about every corner of the Greco-Roman empire is listed in the roll call of place names. What happens at Pentecost gathers a crowd from all over the earth and touches every single one in the crowd.”

¹ Notes taken from Festival of Homiletics CD, May 16-20, 2016, “Sermon: Grace Imathiu – “Preaching the Lectionary the Sunday before Election Day” Luke 20:27-38”

Barbara Brown Taylor shakes her preaching fist at Pentecost: “In the first four books of the New Testament, we learn the good news of what God did through Jesus. In the book of Acts, we learn the good news of what God did through the Holy Spirit. She then adds about our passage today, “The question for me is whether we still believe in a God who acts like that. Do we still believe in a God who blows through closed doors and sets our heads on fire?”

Do we still believe in a God with power to transform us, both as individuals and as a people, or have we come to an unspoken agreement that our God is pretty old and tired by now, someone to whom we may address our prayer requests but not anyone we really expect to change our lives?”

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.” This experience of the Holy Spirit was for everyone in that house where they were sitting. They were all together in one place. And all together they felt it. And all together they were touched. And all together they caught it.

Just as the 12 disciples gathered as one in that room, so too do we gather as one in this church. We gather each Sunday, at this time, and we carry into this building different thoughts, different needs, different longings, different sorrows. And we all come together, regardless of our age, what we wear, what we do, and we come together for one thing – to worship the God who moves us and shakes us, yet who holds us and loves us.

How is the Spirit calling us to be church these days? Are we sticking to the tried and true safe story that got us thus far? How willing are we to turn the page in the story and see just how blank the next page is staring back at us ... until we write the lines there. Will the next page be a copy of the pages previous, or will it show a movement into our future, based on the gifts we have, aware of the faults we have, making us stronger in the knowing?

At my ordination service at Timothy Eaton United Church, in May 2003, there was a rather unobtrusive drummer, who took what looked like a harmless drum up to the front of the altar, and who began to play it during a liturgical dance to the psalm. And what began as a rather pleasant rhythmical beating to the dancer’s movements crescendoed into a rather alarming loud, and violent striking, which seemed to anger me because it seemed way too much, way too excessive, and with every beat of the drum, I seemed to jump. But then a thought came to me – “Maybe this is right?” “Maybe God can be explosive like this – maybe God can be extreme like this – maybe we try to tame God to not be unsettling, to not be disturbing.” This drumming was powerful, explosive. And isn’t God still very capable of being just that in our lives?

Jesus told the disciples that God would send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit to teach them everything and to remind them of all that Jesus had said to them.

When the Spirit comes, it’s going to be messy. When the Spirit comes, what you think is your normal, will no longer be your normal. When the Spirit comes, anything can happen.

Thanks be to God. Amen.