

WHERE IS THE WIDER COMMUNITY?

Day of Pentecost – Year B: Acts 2:1-21

I don't quite know what to make of much of the material in Luke's Acts of the Apostles. I mentioned three weeks ago how easily many of the accounts seem to me to fall into the category of mystical experiences. The case in point that Sunday was Philip's suddenly being transported from the baptism of the Ethiopian man in Gaza to Azotus where Philip continued his ministry, seemingly without missing a beat. The week following, we heard the tail-end of the story of Peter's baptizing Cornelius, a Gentile and a Roman centurion. In fact, Peter ended up baptizing Cornelius's whole household – all of them Gentiles, presumably. Both accounts show how barriers between people were taken down and the community of Jesus' disciples extended to include everyone. Both stories involve angels, multiple visions and dreams, and a number of quite unlikely occurrences.

And so the extraordinary events in today's First Reading, the account of the Holy Spirit coming to Jesus' disciples on Pentecost or Shavuot (its other name), complete with a sound like the "rush of a violent wind," something that looked like tongues of flame resting on each disciple, the transformation of the twelve disciples from fearful to fearless, and their new gift of speaking in many different languages and being understood by a hugely cosmopolitan assembly – all of these things speak again of the mystical and the miraculous; and they are difficult for us to understand as phenomena, at least as Luke has recorded them.

And so, it may be more helpful, rather than focussing on the phenomena, to look beneath the surface of the Pentecost account to its significance in the growth and development of Jesus' disciples and the growth and development in their proclamation of the gospel.

What we do know is that whatever happened on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem some 2,000 years ago, the Jesus movement began growing exponentially. The disciples came out of hiding, taking Jesus' story and their faith to the streets, literally. The Spirit of the Risen Christ was within and among them, and it was wildly contagious. Even allowing for a little exaggeration in Luke's number of converts, there is no question that the disciples and their message found resonance with large assemblies who went on to gather as congregations to learn more, build community, and eventually become what we now know as the church. We have a few names of leaders in the early church – most of them second and third generation disciples, allowing us to track the growth. Beyond Scripture, there is legend, but also history as we see churches planted all over the then-known world by disciples of disciples of disciples. Is there an element of the mystical in the story that followed the Pentecost account? Yes; without question. But this later story holds a mysticism we can better understand, because the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of the Risen Christ, if you will, is very much part of our shared story as people of faith, as a congregation, and as part of the worldwide Christian mission which continues to grow.

One of the phrases I use often to describe the world beyond the walls of Christ Lutheran Church, Waterloo is "the wider community." It is an interesting term, because it suggests a flow from this community of faith into the community and communities beyond our doors. It also suggests that we, as part of this particular community also have a place in the larger community which includes Christians and others. I like suggesting the flow, that our walls are semi-permeable, our doors and windows open. But I am also aware that such ideas are abstract; that our church has brick walls and lockable windows and doors; that as much as we say that we are a welcoming church, there are times of the day and night when you need a key to enter; or you need to know someone who has a key.

And so I started thinking about the phrase "wider community" in light of Luke's description of the Day of Pentecost; I started thinking about the 16 identifiable groups of pilgrims-from-away Jesus' first disciples communicated successfully with, and I started thinking about the mystical presence of the Holy Spirit in, with, and under Jesus' disciples of all times and places. And as I thought on these things, the phrase "wider community," as I use, it fell more and more into question. And it challenged me to consider that from God's point of view, there is only one community; and the work of the Holy Spirit, at least in the signs present in Luke's description of the disciples' Pentecostal experience, is to widen us, if you will; to recognize that as Jesus' disciples, we must first take down the barriers we carry within ourselves; that as Pentecostal Christians, it can never be us and them.

All my life, I have loved the text of Frederick Faber's hymn, There's a Wideness in God's Mercy, and hated the music. What is known as the art song form is distinguished by, among other things, a perfect marriage of text and tune. In my mind, the traditional setting of There's a Wideness in God's Mercy was at war with the text; and I gather I am not alone in my opinion, as the editors of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* found two new tunes to use with it. It was shortly after I became pastor of this congregation that our then-organist Lois Horst and I discovered Calvin Hampton's setting of the familiar text. The beauty of the music and the perfect marriage of text and tune made me want to know more about Calvin Hampton. But actually, there is more insight into who Calvin Hampton was in his treatment of Frederick Faber's poetry than there is in his biography. Calvin Hampton was a gifted American organist and composer whose musical influence in the American Episcopal Church is legendary. But to choose this text to redeem reveals his understanding of how narrow Christians can be; of how unlike God and God's unbounded love we can be; and of the personal pain Calvin Hampton felt because of it. I am more than sure that the same can be said for Frederick Faber's insight in writing this hymn in the first place: it is more a sermon than a hymn. But like all music, it is better than a sermon because it works on us and stays with us. My friend Neil Alexander used to say of the church's song, "We are what we sing."

The gift of Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit, it seems to me, is to create a wider community within each one of us, within the church – so that we take refuge less and less in artificial constructs such as "us" and "them". From God's point of view, from that Holy Spirit that blows through walls and shuttered windows, from that divine eloquence that speaks a universal tongue, there is only "us." We are called by the Spirit to be one community, known for its welcome, its justice, and its mercy. The Pentecost story continues.