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Bridge Street United Church

May 19, 2024

Readings: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 104: 24-35; Acts 2:1-21

Why Pentecost is Important

Today is Pentecost Sunday. It is a day that does not have the significance, especially in our wider culture, of Christmas or Easter. That said, I think it has importance for us, as those who gather here, nonetheless. It is a day when we celebrate the beginnings of the Christian Church as an entity. It marks the occasion when the disciples are transformed from a group waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit to a group who go into the wider world of their day to spread the news of what they believed God, working through Jesus, had done. As I wrote in my note about today's sermon in this week's newsletter, the story of the church's early days shows dramatic growth. In an era when our denomination, like many others, has experienced significant decline over the past generation or two, the story in Acts can also be somewhat discouraging. We don't seem to compare. Now I could say, and it would be true, that over its history the Christian church, in any part of the world where we might look, has had periods of growth and period of decline, but knowing that others have experienced times similar to ours may not make us feel much better about living through our particular challenges.

So what might we make of the story we find in Acts, chapter 2, that I read earlier, a story that paints the beginning of the church in quite glowing terms? I pose the question, and I have noted the contrast between what we see portrayed in Acts and our own contemporary reality, because I think that this passage from Acts, and a celebration of Pentecost more generally, have

important things to say to us today. I want to note in particular two things about this story from Acts, chapter two.

First, the Pentecost story makes clear something we see elsewhere in Scripture—God uses unlikely individuals to accomplish God’s work. Another, and perhaps better, way of making this point is to say that God uses, and transforms, people we would not pick for the task. Peter, who is the key human figure in this story from Acts [I say, human figure, because in the story I think the Holy Spirit is also a key figure] Peter is not the person I would have hired for the position of apparent head and chief spokesperson for this new and newly developing religious movement.

I often have the car radio on as I drive, and I regularly hear ads from a company called ZipRecruiter. They promise you the likelihood of finding, within twenty-four hours, the perfect person to do any job or position for which you are looking to hire someone. They base this likelihood on the hundreds of resumés they have on hand. If ZipRecruiter had been around in the first century, and I had gone to ZipRecruiter to pick someone to lead this about to be launched new religion called Christianity, Peter’s resumé would not have come at the top of those that ZipRecruiter sent me. Peter—the one who denied knowing Jesus three times in that interval after Jesus’ arrest and before Jesus’ crucifixion. After visiting the empty tomb with John after the women who have come there earlier that morning report to the disciples that the tomb is empty, Peter shows such a significant lack of interest in pursuing things further that he simply goes back home. While Peter does declare at one point, in response to Jesus’ question to his disciples about who he was, that Jesus is the Messiah, he does not seem to understand just what that really meant. Peter was, in the words of the contemporary hymn, “a most unlikely man to lead the flock.”

Yet he was the one who became the spokesperson for this early Christian community on the day of Pentecost. He was the one who preached a sermon that day that, according to the author of Acts, led to some three thousand people becoming part of this new religious movement. Even if we allow that Luke could have exaggerated the number who became followers of Jesus as a result of this one event, the early church did experience significant growth in its early years. Peter had been transformed by his experience of Jesus' resurrection and ascension, along with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and he is changed from someone who denied Jesus into a key leader of the Christian church.

But Peter is not alone in being an unlikely character who is transformed in order to play a key role. Paul is transformed from a persecutor of the early church into one of its great leaders. And the stories of Scripture recount others who are not the kind of people we would choose for key roles. I think, for example, of the shepherds who come to see the infant Jesus, rough figures somewhat on the margins of their society, who were willing to believe that an angel might appear to them to tell them of the events in a stable in nearby Bethlehem. They may not have been transformed by the Spirit in the way of a Peter, but they are examples of God choosing those whom we might not choose.

I make these points because I think it would be good on this Pentecost Sunday to think about what God might be calling us to do. Some of you here might say, "You know what, I have worked hard here for many years, and I have done my thing for this congregation. I just want to take it somewhat easy now." And many of you here have worked hard for many years and have done much for this congregation. The same thing would be true for those of you gathered this morning at St. Matthew's United Church. And yet, like that unlikely figure Peter, God might be asking us still to do some things, not necessarily the same things we used to do, but some

different things from the ones we have done in the past, some things we can still do, no matter what our age or stage of life. Something I have mentioned with some frequency in sermons since I have been here is the need to be willing to talk about the things we believe, and why our faith is important to us, in situations where someone invites us to do that in conversation. Others of us may be called to some new or different roles in the congregation, things we have not done before, maybe things we did not think we could do until someone posed that possibility to us. We might think of ourselves as most unlikely ones to do something. But Pentecost is a good time to ask ourselves what God may still be calling us to do, even as God called such an unlikely lot to be followers of Jesus and leaders in the early church.

A second point about the story of this experience of Pentecost as described in Acts, chapter two—each of those early followers of Jesus was given the gift of the Holy Spirit. It came upon all of them, the text makes clear. However, I do not think that all of them had exactly the same gifts. Certainly the emphasis in this story was on them witnessing to what had done in and through Jesus as the long-promised Messiah of the Jewish tradition. But they had formed a community prior to that Pentecost day, a total of about one hundred twenty of them we learn in the previous chapter. They were not all preachers! We need varied skills and gifts in a community. And the remainder of the chapter makes clear that they were a very close-knit community who had come together and whose members supported one another.

Pentecost is about the beginnings of the Christian church, and Acts, chapter 2, both today's passage and what we would hear if we kept on reading to the end of the chapter, speaks about what is important about the church. It is a story about a community that comes together, of transformed individuals who support one another. We, too, are a community. Indeed, as I have noted at various times, our connectedness, our care for one another, and our desire to reconnect

and to strengthen the links among us all speak to our sense of being a community. And that sense of care and connectedness is wonderful to see. That sense of connectedness and care is a precious thing in a world where individuals increasingly lead their lives isolated from others. Today is a day to remember and to celebrate not only an event of long ago but also our current expression of being a Christian community, of being a place to which we each bring the particular gifts God has given to each of us and of being a place where we use those gifts for, among other things, the well-being of this community and those who make it up.

So, yes, let us remember and celebrate that event on Pentecost so long ago and give thanks for transformed individuals who helped to create the Christian church. But let us also contemplate what is asked of us, as those who make up the church in this time and place. And to the God who made us and blessed us with the gifts we have, to the one through whom we have come to know that God most fully, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of that God, with us now and with us always, be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

Resources

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press. 2009.

Willimon, William. *Acts*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988.