Pentecost Sermon
Joanna Shenk
5.31.09

Pentecost is such a rich part of the church year, as we reach the culmination of the birth, death, and rebirth cycle which began with Advent many months ago. There are many vivid images when it comes to Pentecost and traditionally its celebration and feast was rivaled only by Easter. However it is a celebration that has not been highly honored in more recent Church life. Could this be because of the Pentecostal movement and its charismatic excesses or could it be because it has not received as much pop-culture hype (in the same way Easter and Christmas have?). In the former case such hesitation demonstrates a narrow understanding of the meaning of Pentecost. In the latter case, it is unfortunate that the Christ unwittingly follows the cues of consumer culture. Despite these misunderstandings or this devaluation of Pentecost, I believe the church, particularly, those of us at FOH, can be called back to a more radical understanding of Pentecost.

Hence, this morning I want to reflect on three ways in which the experience of Pentecost is meant to change us. First—We learn that Pentecost empowers the disempowered. Second—Pentecost invites us to listen in new ways as we recognize the Spirit speaking many different languages. Third—Pentecost incorporates diverse people into an egalitarian community which values and utilizes all gifts.

The experience of receiving the Holy Spirit was not expected and was not an experience that was easy to describe. My guess is that is was quite confusing and unsettling. First, there was a wind. And it wasn't just any wind, it was a violent, rushing wind. Has anyone ever stood outside during a thunderstorm? And although I hope not, has anyone been close enough to a tornado to feel its winds? These are not nice breezes. I do not believe the author of Acts wanted us to envision a group of people sweating it out in a stuffy, hot upper room, only to be refreshed by a cool breeze of the Spirit. No. The author said that there were “what appeared to be” flames of fire above everyone's head. That sounds uncomfortable to me... more like a furnace of the Spirit, which seemed to spontaneously combust the

disciples.

They were so burned by the Spirit that they began to call out in whatever way they could. This of course lead to exclamations in languages other than their own. And since we have heard this story so many times, it does not surprise or unsettle us. It was normal... expected. But the truth is we're wrong, no one was expecting such an intense and transformative experience. And considering that the account was written a good many years after the event, it was probably even more chaotic and disturbing than we've been told. In a few different verses the author of Acts describes the crowd's reaction as bewildered, amazed, astonished, perplexed, and skeptical. After all, those speaking were accused of being drunk. So what can we learn from this most unusual event which is often referred to as a the birth of the New Testament church?

First—We learn that Pentecost empowers the disempowered. Those who had been weak and hidden way in upper rooms, were made strong and bold. They were not replaced by a stronger group of people, they were transformed and remade by God. They were not intimidated by religious or civil leaders even though they recognized that their claims would endanger their safety. Due to their boldness and conviction many people were drawn to their witness and joined the movement.

According to Palestinian theologian Naim Ateek, this experience at Pentecost has many parallels to the experience of the Palestinian people during the *intifada* of the late 80's. Intifada in Arabic means "to shake off." Up until this point, the Palestinian people had endured much oppression at the hands of the Israeli occupying forces in their homeland. Due to the aggressive tactics of Zionist groups, Palestinians had been forced to give up close 80% of their land, despite the fact that the original United Nations resolution had only given the Israeli government 52%. Although there is no question that the Jewish people had been severely mistreated, reparations that involved the oppression of another group of people were not just. Hence with the advent of the intifada the Palestinian people were seeking to "shake off" the occupation that left them voiceless and disempowered. According to Ateek

the intifada began spontaneously and was much like a spontaneous combution. Although it was not completely nonviolent, since it commenced with the throwing of rocks at the occupying forces, it did contain other components such as business strikes against the occupying forces. In his article, "Pentecost and the Intifada"[1] Ateek has this to say:

> Before the intifada started, the life of the Palestinian community under occupation was one of fear, hopelessness, despair, weakness, disorganization, and demoralization. No future was in sight. Everything around them looked gloomy. Then on December 9, 1987, at the funeral of four Gazans killed by Israelis, Palestinians started throwing stones at Israeli soldiers, who responded with live bullets. The intifada had started. It was a spontaneous reaction against an oppressive regime that was literally getting away with murder.
> The intifada caught like fire. It spread quickly throughout the West Bank and Gaza. It could not be quelled or contained. It drew Palestinians together and attracted many others. It was totally unexpected. It was not planned or calculated by the Palestinians.
>
> Palestinians as well as tother have tried to analyze the causes and background to the intifada, but many admit they cannot completely fathom the depth of what happened. The intifada is greater than any analysis of it. No scientific analysis can do justice to the real event. In other words, the real event exceeded the expectation of the people. This historical event changed many peoples' lives. In those first few weeks and months of the intifada, the Israeli occupying forces were very harsh in their reaction against the Palestinians, but the people were still exuberant. They had finally broken many chains that the Israelis had imposed on them... (76)
>
> Because of the intifada, a new life has entered the dry bones of the Palestinians, and a new spirit has come upon them, bringing about a radical change in them... (77)

Ateek then goes on to comment on the biblical Pentecost:

> It was an intifada caused by the Spirit and the living power of God being poured into the lives of the early disciples. It was an empowerment by the Spirit that the followers of Jesus received and that could not be hidden or contained. A new dynamic reality was visible in their lives. This was precisely the experience of the Palestinians. From fear and weakness, they emerged empowered as a result of the intifada. (77)

This empowerment, we see, came in Palestine, both more recently and in the first century, when a community of people come together and declared a new reality. This was a reality that was not dependent on the rich and powerful, but instead its adherents proclaimed that despite their seeming defeat by the occupying forces they were empowered by hope. This hope was manifest in their

---

1 In the edited book, *Reading from this Place, Vol 2: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, Edited by Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert.

boldness and their unrelenting courage in the face of violent retaliation.

Second—Pentecost invites us to listen in new ways as we recognize the Spirit speaking many different languages. In her book, *In Wisdom's Path,* Jan Richardson reflects on the listening that happened in this way. "The miracle of Pentecost was not that the people spoke in different languages but that they understood one another. This means they must have really listened to one another, must have really heard the remarkable words springing from each other's mouths. It is that gift, that miracle of listening that I hunger for in the church, where passion for our own positions and beliefs often dims our ability to truly hear one another."

Clearly not everyone was tuned in to what the believers were saying. Some were amazing, some were perplexed, and some were cynical. And these responses seem pretty standard when it comes to our encounters with the Spirit. Could God really be telling us to do that? To believe what?!? Isn't that too dangerous or outrageous? Often the answer is yes... if we're really hearing the Spirit. As Richardson says, when we really listen to the Spirit speaking through each other we might encounter an idea that calls into question our pet issues. We may realize that to deeply connect with the work of the Spirit we must give up control over how we think change should happen in the church. This is no easy task and this is why listening and understanding is such a miracle.

At the time of Pentecost we recognize that God was also choosing to speak through who were not connected to the religious institutions of the day. These spontaneously combusting disciples were misfits and up until that point had been cowards about sharing the good news of Jesus. However, God still chose them to share the message of hope. Like we reflected earlier, God did not choose a stronger group of folks to share the good news—a group who would have been more socially acceptable—but instead empowered those who had been silenced and discouraged. God chose those on the margins to be the bearers of a new vision of reality. And unfortunately the church's track record has not been so hot when it comes to listening to those on the margins. So by reclaiming the experience of Pentecost as

central our self-understanding as the church, we commit ourselves to listening to those on the margins.

This then leads us to our Third experience of Pentecost—Pentecost incorporates diverse people into an egalitarian community which values and utilizes all gifts. Given the association of Pentecost with Pentecostalism it is easy to narrow the gifts of the Holy Spirit into the category of speaking in tongues. This is not at all what happened though. In contrast to Paul's explanation of ecstatic speech in 1 Cor 14, the passage in Acts in referring actual languages being spoken. For how else would the diverse tribes who were gathered in Jerusalem have been able to understand what was being said?

So what were and are the gifts that the Holy Spirit poured out? First, we understand the gift as the empowerment of the members of the community of believers. Second, in Acts 2, verses 42-46, we see the embodiment of gifts resulting in devotion to the apostles teaching, to fellowship, to hospitality, to wealth redistribution, and to prayer. Third, the specific gifts are described in the Bible in different ways. In 1 Cor. the list includes the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, tongues, and interpretation of tongues. Traditionally, though, Isaiah 11:2-3 is understood by the church to outline the gifts that are given to people for their sanctification. This list includes seven gifts: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord.

In any case though, these gifts are not given merely for personal edification. In her book *The Rising*, Wendy Wright talks about the gifts in this way. "The gifts are not given for individual enrichment or enhancement; they are given to be shared. They are meant to give life to the whole community... [In our culture] rarely do we consider that the gifts were given to us precisely that they might spill out to others or that others' gifts were given that they might spill over to us. But that, in fact, is the underlying meaning of the tongues of flame riding on the wind... They proceed outward to the apostles only to flow through them to the surrounding peoples and nations of the earth."

Hence we see that Pentecost forever diversifies the message of Jesus. Instead of requiring

converts to conform to a standard language and culture, the message is mysteriously... miraculously... translated into many different languages at the same time. According to Judy Yates Siker, a professor of New Testament at Graduate Theological Union, "Such a rereading of the Pentecost story... shows that... the people of God are called on to look outside themselves in order truly to be God's people. By shifting our focus from the unifying nature to the unsettling nature of the Spirit, we begin to see that the birth of the Church was not an imposition of uniformity but a blessing of multiple expressions of the Gospel. Sometimes the work of the Spirit pushes us out of the familiar into the unknown."

In conclusion, let us recall the words of Paul in his letter to the Romans. In chapter 8 he speaks of the groaning of people and of creation.

> The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. For who hopes in what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it patiently. (Romans 8:19-25)

So as we face the disempowering structures of oppression in our world, we recognize that the power of Pentecost enlivens a hope that can set us free although we may still appear weak in the eyes of the powerful. Particularly for many of us who are privileged in this culture, the experience of Pentecost challenges us to listen to voices from the margins and to adjust our vision for change accordingly. And as we begin to listen we will be transformed by the voices that speak from different contexts and call into question the limiting uniformity that has so often characterized Christianity. As a body of believers at FOH are we willing to be unsettled by the Spirit? Are we willing to wind-blown by the violent rushing of the Spirit? On this Pentecost Sunday, what is the Spirit igniting in us?