

January 14, 2018
National Presbyterian Church
Together In Faith: II. Can You Hear Me Now?
Acts 2:1-13, 14-21
Dr. David Renwick

Last Sunday, we began a new series of sermons in which we're going to be focusing on the roots of the Christian church, our background as a church: not the Presbyterian Church alone, but the whole church of Jesus Christ scattered around the world (what we call "the Holy Catholic Church").

And we're fortunate that we can do this, because we have in the pages of the Bible plenty foundational or constitutional passages and stories of and for the church community. Among these are the stories of our founding fathers and mothers in a book called *The Acts of the Apostles*.

To begin with, actually we might call them our "floundering" fathers and mothers! When Jesus lived – and then so unexpectedly (to them, at least!) died, they were floundering! They were lost! But in God's good time, when God empowered them by His Spirit the flounder-ers became the founders of the church, and their story should be as important to us, as significant to us, as laid deeply in our hearts and minds, as the story of the founding fathers and mothers of our nation.

Indeed: If we are to be the church – the community – that God calls us to be, then, like any peoples or nation, we must know where we've come from; we must know our origins; we must know our fundamental purpose. And this we discover, in part, at least, by looking back to the beginning of the story. And that's what we began to do last Sunday and that's what we're doing in the weeks that lie ahead of us.

So this week we come to the second sermon in this series, looking at the second chapter of the *Book of Acts*, and the passage we've just read (2:1-21).

Our passage tells us about an event that takes place less than two months after Jesus life and death; less than 2 months after the first Easter when Jesus rises from the grave; less than 2 months after some of Jesus' closest friends, his disciples, run away, leave the city of Jerusalem, disillusioned, their hearts broken, having seen their friend crucified, and when some head back home, saying, "*It's all over. Let's go back to fishing! There's nothing left. We wished that we had never come this far.*"

But within those 2 months, (50 days, in fact), something else begins to happen which breaks the disillusionment. These disciples, these friends of Jesus, come to believe some things so strongly that their lives are completely turned around, so that instead of fleeing and staying away, they regroup and gather together again.

1. RESURRECTION: They become filled with the conviction that Jesus is not dead anymore but alive. They were convinced of the resurrection:

- They were down-to-earth people.
- They'd seen something, not just felt something.
- They'd seen something which brought them together again
- and that something was a "Some-One": Jesus, risen from the grave.

2. MISSION: And in the power of the resurrection, they are drawn together and realize, in the 2nd place, that HIS mission is by no means over, but is still functioning. Jesus is still the boss. And against all the odds he wants them! He wants to use them, and send them out to continue his ministry after he is no longer visible here on earth.

- SO they believe in the resurrection.
- And they believe that they have been given a mission which is absolutely inescapable.

3. POWERLESS/POWER-FILLED. And in the third place, they recognize that by themselves, they are powerless to fulfill this mission!

- They are weak. They are fearful.
- They're the kind who runs away. They're not great.
- They're not like Jesus.
- They are far from perfect.
- In fact, spiritually speaking – they're empty and powerless.

BUT what they also realize is that God can give them the power that they need, beyond their own, to do what Jesus asks and did.

And so we find in the first chapter of Acts a wonderful verse, Acts 1:8, in which God speaks to them and says to them, *“Don't rush off on your own, and certainly don't rush away. Stay here in Jerusalem and wait. Wait for the power that I will give to you by my ongoing presence – by my Holy Spirit – so that you will be able to do what you cannot do by yourselves.”*

And so they wait. They wait 50 days from Easter until the Jewish feast of Pentecost when this is what happens:

“Jesus' followers 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. Divided tongues of fire appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them, and all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability.”

In other words – at a moment when nobody expects it, God puts on this multimedia show in which he's screaming, *“Can you hear me now? Do I have **your** attention?* The attention not only of the existing disciples, but the attention of many people from all over the world who happened to be in Jerusalem at the time, from nations, some of which would undoubtedly be described by the sophisticated Romans, and all of which would have been described by the purity loving God-fearing people of Judea, as “unclean.”

In fact, thinking of descriptive words for “uncleanness” the slang word for “excrement” in NT Greek surprisingly – actually does appear in the New Testament

- It's *SKUBOLA* and it's translated “dung” in the King James translation of the Bible
- though all the other more recent versions (including our pew Bibles, NRSV, and NIV) cover it up (using the word “rubbish”) because the words dung or excrement are too distasteful

And it's the Apostle Paul who uses it in his Letter to the Philippians – (Ch.3, v.8) write it down! And he uses it not to describe all the other unclean nations and peoples around him but himself – and his former religious attitude in life, apart from Christ. And in particular

- His self-righteousness,

- His sense of his own purity,
- His sense of his own greatness
- His inability to admit weakness or error
- His sense that he and his race were superior to others.

He says he “counts this kind of self-righteous and superiority – this way of thinking as “*SKUBOLA*” in order to gain Christ; “*SKUBOLA*” in comparison to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord.”

But by way of contrast – what God does in Acts 2, on Pentecost is to put on a multi-media show to demonstrate that he has no interest whatsoever in condemning the unclean, “*SKUBOLA peoples and nations of the world*”, but only of loving them and living within their hearts, embracing and filling what sophisticated and righteous people would have thought of as the worst places and people, unworthy of his presence and power!

Let me fill in the details that we omitted from our Scripture reading in vv.9-10

Among the people there that day were

- Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia. I.e., those people who come from unclean races and nations in the east.
- Then there are some from Judea (that’s the people who think they are clean).
- Then from Cappadocia and Pontus and Asia and Phrygia and Pamphylia. That’s the unclean people to the north.
- And then Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene. That’s all the unclean people and nations in Africa to the south.
- And then visitors from Rome. That’s the sophisticated but just as unclean people from the West that’s US! the equivalent of Europe and the United States today
- Both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs. People of all kinds of unclean races were there that day.

Indeed, if you were a sophisticated first century Roman OR a self-righteous purity minded Israelite the Pentecostal scene is the most unlikely and offensive scenario that you can imagine.

The Holy God, the Resurrected Jesus, with no condemnation or judgment, with no fire and brimstone (at that moment), but only with tongues of purifying and loving fire, reaching out into the lives of all the unclean of the world gathered in Jerusalem. Doing everything He could to get their attention – to translate the message of his living, saving, son, Jesus, into their tongue and culture

Simon Peter, Jesus’ closest friend, used the words of the prophet Joel describes the significance of that divine moment like this:

“In the last days (that is, in the days that follow after the Messiah comes), God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh.

- Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.
- Your young men shall see visions.
- Your old men shall dream dreams.
- Even upon my slaves, both men and women in those days,
I will pour out my Spirit and they shall prophesy.”

Here – the description of God’s interest in the whole gamut of life is not in terms of different nations and races, but in terms of different people in different social strata in life. But it’s the same thing.

Peter and Joel are both saying that “While the Holy Spirit God’s presence Christ’s presence has been active in the world from the dawn of creation, in creation itself, and in God’s ancient people and in particular – in the lives of Holy people who were close to God — people who in some sense were “clean,,” – what was happening now was the pouring out of God’s Holy Spirit – on ALL (kinds of) FLESH! As if the dam had burst, as if there was a flood of God’s Presence, and as if God was saying,

“I no longer want to be tied up in a holy box (the Temple or tabernacle). I want to flood the earth with my presence,

I won’t just come to special clean people.

- I will come to the rank and file, to ordinary people,
- and live within them; and move among them – as my people.

I no longer want to be active in a limited way

- but in all kinds of peoples throughout the earth: “all flesh”

— everyone:

- young/ old
- Jew/ Gentile
- slave/ free
- rich/ poor

anyone and everyone who knows their weakness and needs my love and power. To them I will give my presence and power

- to know my will
- and to do my will,
- and to share my will with others.”

And this inconceivably, according to the story in the Acts of the Apostles is exactly what happened.

Within a decade the church grew rapidly and became a multi-national, multi-racial community – not without difficulty: A multi-national, multi-racial community in which the followers of Jesus, empowered by God’s Spirit began to translate the message of Jesus into the tongues and cultures of their world at that time

- The impact of that Pentecost moment was enormous.
- The impact of that event was spectacular.
- It was limitless!

And by the same Spirit – in the same power of the Risen Jesus – God charges you and me to carry on the same mission: so the world can hear and see Jesus NOW!

BUT HOW? Let me suggest 4 ways.

First, by the Sustaining and constant Renewing of our Congregation as a Center for Preaching in a secular world.

Did you notice? Immediately the Holy Spirit comes, is poured out on Jesus’ followers, the first Christian sermon is preached by Simon Peter.

Preaching – the proclamation of the message of Jesus is fundamental to the ministry of the Church: Holy Spirit empowered preaching.

Or, let me put it like this: for the past 40 years I have always believed and depended on the fact that when a congregation prays for the preacher and the preaching

- then God's Spirit can take – not just the best sermon – but the most awful sermon
- and create a Pentecost translating it into the language of the hearts of any-and-all who gather.
- I expect and depend upon this Pentecostal miracle – and your prayers – every week!

The pulpit, the preaching of God's word, is a primary channel for God to speak to our world today. But the pulpit without a loving community can become barren

So second, we carry on this mission when we pay attention to our congregational life and make sure that our congregation is not just a gathering but a true communion or community that – who we are and what we do intentionally become like the family of Jesus.

In our society and world, there's an enormous hunger – to belong! To belong to a family that is not dysfunctional! To a genuine family filled with love. And this is what we have been called to be as a church. Not in our own strength: it's not possible! But prayerfully, by the Pentecostal Spirit power of God all things are possible

Then third, we have to turn outward in love – not just inward but outward.

Turning outward not to condemn the world as dirty. (How horrible it is that Christians in our nation are increasingly seen not as lovers but as judgmental haters – and especially by young people.

see <https://www.barna.com/research/christians-more-like-jesus-or-pharisees/>).

So we need to demonstrate God's passion for the world in word and deed, locally and internationally in love!

- I am so proud to be the pastor of a church that gave over \$80,000 to victims of floods and hurricanes last year, and supported a refugee family who continue to become independent
- I'm so proud to be the pastor of a church that has provided millions of dollars to train pastors around the world –
- supporting Christian colleges and seminaries in other lands
- I am so proud to be a pastor of a church that reaches out and supports the translation of the Scriptures into the tongues of every tribe and nation
- I am so proud to be the pastor of a church which feeds the hungry and cares for the homeless in fabulously wealthy city.

And so much more.

So we continue Christ's mission – and follow the pattern and use the power of Acts 2 and Pentecost

1. When we sustain the pulpit and empower the proclamation of the Gospel so people can hear us now
2. When we build the church into a family that reflects Christ
3. When we serve God's world and the city in which we live

And fourth, We pursue Christ's mission when we allow God to expand our vision and our horizons.

Simon Peter, quoting Joel, spoke of

- Your sons and your daughters prophesying.
- Your young men seeing visions.
- Your old men dreaming dreams.

A huge vision for the future, when inspired by the Holy Spirit, is never meant by God to be the passion only of the young BUT of young and old together. So what is it that God wants us to do that hasn't yet entered our minds to expand his reach to the world through us?

Every week, for example – about 200 folks are joining us, locally and from around the world, online. What's next?

The late business guru, Peter Drucker once said this:

"I'll never forget when President Roosevelt announced publicly in WWII that we would build thirty thousand fighter planes.

I was on the task force that worked on our economic strength – on what was financially feasible. And we had just reached the conclusion that we could build at most four thousand. We thought, 'For goodness sake, he's senile.' But two years later, we built not thirty thousand but fifty thousand."

And Drucker concludes: *"I don't know whether he knew or whether he just realized that unless you set objectives very high, you don't achieve anything at all."*

That's what the Holy Spirit does – and did on that day in Acts 2, forcing those first disciples, and now forcing us, to break out of our limited horizons to see possibilities never seen before – touching and transforming the unclean, the untouchable, the unthinkable, the foreign or strange:

- Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia.
- People from Judea and Cappadocia and Pontus and Asia and Phrygia and Pamphylia.
- And then Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene.
- And then visitors from Rome.
- Both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs.

People of all kinds of nations and races were there that day. Hearing and transformed by the Loving Gospel of the risen Jesus Christ Empowered by the Spirit.

And today, the same Spirit is HERE! What about us? What does God's Spirit have in store for us?

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THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800