



Who Needs to Be There?

TEXT
Acts 2:1-13

June 4, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

The disciples moved into the streets preaching, and before the day was over, 3,000 people joined the church.

Later in Acts, disciples will heal the sick; they will cast out demons. They will put an end to poverty in their community, and they will live in a way that is so compelling that even on this day, over 2,000 years later, there are Christians in every land who will gather to worship God, share this simple meal and read again these stories. Reading through Acts can be a little intimidating. They seemed to get everything right.

Sometimes it seems like so much is wrong. Nooses were showing up in Washington, D.C., this past week, including one left in the Museum for African American History. Jeremy Christian hollered out at his arraignment, “You call it terrorism, I call it patriotism.” He was referring to murdering two men and attempting to do the same to a third because they intervened when he insulted two Muslim women on a train. There is a lot of behavior that folks are calling patriotic these days that seems strange to me. I don’t know, maybe it is a love of country, but it does not reflect a love of God or neighbor.

There were explosions in Afghanistan this week and attacks in London last night, and another boat of refugees fleeing Syria capsized this week; I have no idea how many drowned. Sometimes it seems that so much is going wrong, and that which is right is too weak, too fragile, too insignificant.

I’m sure the early followers of Jesus felt the same way. But when the Spirit came upon them at Pentecost, something changed. Something dramatic changed.

Pentecost is a Spirit day. I don’t know what you think of when you think of the Holy Spirit, but if I were to venture a guess, it makes us think of a feeling we get — a sense that God is close. There is that old spiritual: “Every time I *feel* the spirit.”

I think that is a common way of understanding the Spirit, but I think the Holy Spirit is more complicated than that. I think the Spirit changes what we understand reality to be. And when that happens, people make different choices. I think the Holy Spirit is not simply something we feel, but it is the power that enables us to make different choices. At least that’s what happened on Pentecost.

Luke says that there were lots of people in Jerusalem for

the Jewish festival of Pentecost. There were Parthians, Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, just to name a few. They had come from everywhere. They were there for the festival. They spoke different languages. So it would not be too much to say they were all in the same place, but they were not together. They didn’t talk to one another. There was no connection.

But the Spirit of God filled these early followers of Jesus, and they did something unexpected, miraculous even. They went out into that complex crowd, and they began to talk to folks in their own language.

How is this, we hear, each of us, in our own native language? It was compelling. What they realized is that they couldn’t be the church by themselves. They couldn’t be the church without them.

They say 3,000 joined the church that day. The miracle was not that these Galilean disciples all of a sudden learned to speak in foreign tongues. The miracle is that they wanted to. The miracle is that they realized that they were connected to one another. That’s what the Spirit shows us.

I was on a trip to Chile, traveling with a group of Presbyterians to witness the mission

work of our denomination in Latin America. It was amazing and inspiring to see the work of our church bringing great hope to places of great need. One day our group divided — you go there, we will go here — and only after separating did we realize that all of our Spanish speakers were in the other group.

My Spanish peaked at *gracias, adios and taco*. We had trouble getting to our destination. We asked people on the street for directions to our restaurant. Many did not understand, and we didn't understand them. There were crowds of people walking by, all talking at the speed of light — not a word to be understood — when all of a sudden I heard, “Y'all need directions?”

“Y'all?” The voice of angels. It was a guy born in Santiago, but he went to school at the University of Tennessee, where I could tell immediately he learned the essentials. When you speak in a way that can be heard, then the crowds are no longer simply crowds, but there is connection.

The Spirit did not just give the disciples speech abilities; the Spirit did not just develop a fantastic evangelism program. The Spirit showed them that they couldn't be the church without each other.

It's a remarkable moment, and it's a remarkable list: Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene . . . Cretans and Arabs. They came from everywhere. But not just every *place*; they came from every *time*.

Luke says there were Medes there that day. That would be a

trick. It would be like getting our new Village U catalog that Dr. Nishioka is organizing for us. And there you can see the courses that are offered, and you can see that Rodger is teaching what it means to be Presbyterian. And Len Carrell is teaching a class on the Sermon on the Mount. Arlin Buyert is teaching about his poetry in prison experience, and Al Pugsley is teaching about driving electric cars. And Thomas Jefferson will be giving a talk on religious liberty.

You might think that our facts were wrong. Luke says there were Medes there, but these peoples had vanished from the pages of history hundreds of years before.¹

Some say Luke is just sloppy. He doesn't get his facts straight. It's fake news. But I think Luke knows exactly what he is saying. He is telling us what is true. And the truth is the church, the community of God's Spirit, includes not only people from every place, but also from every time. They are all part of God's family. There is none left out of God's work of redemption — none!

The Spirit showed the early followers of Jesus that this is the truth. Parthians, Medes and Elamites — that's who they were in the morning, but by nightfall, they were the church family. Now they still spoke different languages; they still had different races; they still came from different places and cultures, but at their core, they were children of God.

Have you seen those commercials on TV where ancestry.com advertises that you can

send in a DNA swab, and they can tell you your ancestral heritage? They have someone say, “I thought I was from Spain, but it turns out I'm 68 percent Native American.” And then they say, “I am eating new foods or I am wearing different clothes. When I discover that in reality I am connected to folks, it changes my behavior.”

I think that's what happened on Pentecost. The Spirit shows us who our family is. We belong to one another.

I know that to say such a thing, after we have had another week like the one this past week, to some will sound naïve.

“What a wonderful world that would be, Tom, if people just acted like we are in it together. But there is violence in London, and murder in Portland, and we have to worry about Pittsburgh.”

Some would say we have to be realistic. We want to choose the good when we can, but we have real enemies in the world, and there are real political powers in the world, and goodness knows, there are economic realities that must be taken into account. We can't afford to be naïve.

I don't disagree; but I am coming to believe that what is so often presented as realism has some naiveté of its own.

Several weeks ago, some friends invited Carol and me to join them at an event to support and celebrate the work of the Truman Presidential Library. John Lewis and James Clyburn were recognized as the evening reflected on Truman's work in race relations, a focus that is

very timely. John Lewis, as you well know, was beaten senseless on the Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama, in March 1965.

Half a century later, John Lewis said a man came to his Congressional Office in Washington. He told John Lewis that he had been one of the officers who had beaten him that day in 1965. Lewis said tears were in his eyes. “I was blinded by hatred, and I was wrong. I am so sorry. I was wrong.”

Lewis said, “I forgive you.” And then he said, “I continue to believe that it is possible for us to get it right.”

Now some would say that with all that goes wrong among us, to believe that we can get it right is naïve. To choose character, to choose the high road, to choose to live in grace and love is naïve. But I think the Spirit, like some divine ancestry.com commercial, shows us what is truly real and to ignore that is naïve.

It will happen again this week. There will be voices that say because you are of another race, you don’t belong. There will be voices that say because you are of another religion, you don’t belong. There will be voices that say because you are of another sexual orientation ... or because you are poor ... or because you are mentally ill ... or because you are a prisoner ... you don’t belong.

And there will no doubt be those who choose violence and seek to rid the world of those they deem unworthy to be here. The world has assumed that is realistic for a long time now.

The Spirit came upon the followers of Jesus, and they looked out over a world divided, a world defined by geography and language and culture, a world shaped by what set people apart. And this Spirit did not erase those differences — no, not at all. But the Spirit showed the church that those differences do not define us and therefore need not divide us.

¹Many commentators identify this circumstance, among them Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (1971), p. 170.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.