

May 23, 2021

Acts 2: 1-4, 12-21

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Fill Us Up, Lord”

The selected verses for today from the second chapter of Acts hopped over one of the most difficult sections in the bible to read aloud. Verses 5-11 in Acts chapter 2 present a series of strange sounding names, identifying towns and territories and people of the known ancient world. It can be a real tongue twister. There is no doubt Pastor Katya can read this section flawlessly. As a native Russian and one who is extremely fluent in English, we know she has a knack for languages. Skipping over this section wasn't about saving her the struggle of hard words. It's not about her. It's mostly about the rest of us. This is an important day for the church. It's Pentecost, when we celebrate the birth of the church and the power of the Holy Spirit. Getting bogged down in the second chapter of Acts with all of the strange sounding words could distract us from hearing the clear and uncompromising message that the Holy Spirit is still moving. The Holy Spirit is still creating faithful communities in the world. We want to hear what God is saying to us, not be confused by it. So, we didn't deal with the weird words today. That is, until now. As your preacher, I realize the deeper power of the Holy Spirit's work can not be appreciated without the list of exotic and far-flung places in verses 5-11. It goes to the whole point of what the bible wants us to know, that no place and no people are left out when it comes to God's reach. God knows us and finds us, and God will fill us and reshape us, until all of us take our place as partners in God's redeeming mission.

Before we turn to these challenging verses, let us clarify the context. The disciples are following the instruction of the risen Jesus to remain in Jerusalem until they are “clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49) Think of the room where the disciples are gathered as the birthing room. The church is about to be born and this isn't the result of the disciples' abilities or good intentions. A new, spirit-filled community comes into being because of what God makes possible. Also important to understand is that the Holy Spirit isn't just assuring the followers of Jesus God is blessing them. The Spirit's power is flowing through them into the world. How far will the Spirit go and who will be included? It's the strange words of verses 5-11 that give the answer. Listen to how wide the influence of God can reach. *Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound [we're told earlier it's a sound like a rushing wind] the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.* (Acts 2: 5-11) God knows us and finds us, and God will fill us and reshape us, until all of us take our place as partners in God's redeeming mission.

If the Holy Spirit suddenly filled the places where the followers of Jesus gather today, the list of strange words would be different but the message about God's reach would be the same. All of us hear the message about God's power in the situations of our lives: Delawarians and Central Ohians, Cincinnatians and Clevelanders, those from the East Coast and the West, Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and progressives, Europeans and African-Americans, and those who are young or old, rich or poor, gay or straight, worshipping in the sanctuary or on-line, all of us hear the message about “God's deeds of power.” The Holy Spirit gave birth to the church long ago and the same Holy Spirit brings the church to life today.

Often when Pentecost Sunday rolls around I remember a spirit-filled experience I had years ago. I had the opportunity to participate in the leadership of a trip to Russia where youth from the United Methodist Church connected with Christians there. We were in Moscow on a Sunday morning just after Easter and the congregation was celebrating baptism in the lives of new converts to the faith. The sanctuary was packed. The service was in Russian, of course, and we didn't understand a word. The new believers were baptized one by one, wearing white gowns and descending down into a baptism pool near the altar. Even though everything was so foreign to us there was the clear feeling we were a part of what was happening. When the last baptism was celebrated the entire congregation began to sing “Amazing Grace.” They sang in Russian. We sang in English. Who would have thought it possible? We were all together in one place and, despite so many obvious differences, the Holy Spirit made us one in the Lord.

The Holy Spirit continues to move, like in the lives of the new members we've welcomed today. How amazing that a person living in North Carolina or California can experience a sense of community with us. The Spirit is still creating new opportunities to serve Christ, and this brings us to the end of the sermon but the beginning of the next step in our lives. What is the power of the Spirit bringing to life in us? Maybe you are feeling a tug on your heart or a stirring in your mind that wonders if there is more that God is ready to do in your life. Is it to serve more directly in a mission experience? Is it to continue the conversation around important issues like racism or equality, deepening your witness about the love of Christ for all people? Is it being part of our VBS team, or

working with our youth, or becoming part of a small group experience because you are ready to grow in your faith? God fills us with the Holy Spirit so that today's church will be a catalyst for new life. To this we say, "to God be the glory." Yes, "to God be glory, great things God has done." "To God be the glory" great things God is doing, and "to God be the glory" for all God will do. Amen and Amen.