

[Pentecost sermon 2020]

PENTECOST
MAY 31, 2020

1ST MARSHALL
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ACTS 2:1-4; I CORINTHIANS 12:1-13; JOHN 15: 12-17

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing you may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

This week we're observing the festival of Pentecost – the day reserved by the Church to celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples some 50 days after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The bible passage about this experience that was read today from Acts 2 was actually a shortened version of the whole story – it was the Cliff Notes, the Cheat Sheet, a re-cap of the longer story of the very first Pentecost. I'm talking, of course, about the account of the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit on the disciples in Jerusalem almost 20 centuries ago...

You remember how Jesus called and surrounded himself with his followers. He would approach extraordinarily...**ordinary** men and women – people just like you and me! He'd start by inviting them to walk around and talk, share a meal and a chat, or sit around the fire and tell stories: about life and death, about family and faith, about loving God and serving one's neighbor.

As his little band of brothers and sisters grew, those people dedicated themselves to being Jesus' disciples, his students, his pupils, his posse, his peeps!!!

This began their amazing adventure of following the call of God – it was filled with challenge and change, it was filled with life and love, it was filled with dedication and aggravation, it was filled with serious conviction and, ultimately, crucifixion...

Then, when the dust settled and the crowds had dispersed, when the disciples focused less on Jesus' crucifixion and more on his resurrection, when things had finally settled down and almost everything seemed kinda back to normal... that's when God started moving around and within people, touching their hearts with love, filling their heads with visions of the kingdom, strengthening the gift of faith that set their souls on fire...

And finally, on that very special day, when they are all gathered together as they had in the past...suddenly their lives are changed – in a moment, in the blink of an eye –

-a sound like the rush of a mighty wind from heaven fills their ears,

-a vision of tongues of fire rests on each one of them,

-then they are filled with the Holy Spirit – and these extraordinarily ordinary people begin speaking in languages I'm sure some of them had never even heard!

They are united – they are one – not by blood, and certainly not by politics, nor by education, occupation or dedication...they are one...in the message they proclaim! Says the bible, Acts 2 verse 11 – they were all *speaking about God's acts of power...*

A few people have very dramatic stories to tell about God's acts of power in their lives... However, I'd hazard a guess that most of you are like me and have stories to share about God's grace that are much less exciting, but no less life-changing, much less thrilling but no less amazing, much less breathtaking but no less inspiring...

So take a moment and talk about how you have seen God's power at work in your life, or in the life of someone you love...

PAUSE *talk about God's manifestation of power in your life*

Welcome back!

This is an amazing story of how people from all over the world hear these people talk about Jesus in their very own languages! Can you imagine it?

People divided by country and creed,

People divided by skin color and hair color,

People divided by family systems and political systems,

People divided by their hopes for the future and the pain in their pasts...

All these people...in their very own languages...hear the very same story of God's gift of grace for all people through Jesus Christ.

I like this story of Pentecost – partially because it's exactly what we need to hear *right now* in these dark, anger-and-pain-filled days following the death of Floyd George in Minneapolis. We are divided: by race, creed, color, wealth, whether or not to open up churches now, whether or not to wear a mask...

We are living the opposite experience of that old story from Genesis 11 about the Tower of Babel...

(To read a good, scholarly article about Luther's view on the Tower of Babel experience, visit the website below.)

<https://aura.abdn.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/2164/10808/TheTowerofBabel.SCEdraft.06.07.18rev.pdf;jsessionid=F52DCE12CD0D78F4D506D543C586C257?sequence=1>

All humanity had one language, and, we're told, one purpose – hard to believe right now, isn't it? But their unity of language and purpose does not mean that all was right in the world. In fact, the united purpose humanity had embraced was to build a massive tower – high enough to allow them challenge God, confront God, overpower God...

It was like our ancestors took the sin of the Garden of Eden (“*you will be like God*”), then pumped it full of pride – and twisted it to say, ***You will be better than God...***

And yet, as they soon discovered, the hallowed halls of heaven were never really in danger. In Genesis 11:5 we're told that God had to ***come down*** to see the mighty city and its famous towering turret! And after surveying their crude attempt at *being like God*, the Lord decided to dis-unify the people, to confuse their languages and scatter them over the face of the earth...

Human beings, united by one language and one purpose (rebellion), became dis-united by language and everything else that follows...as we have seen in these last few disturbing, disheartening, disastrous days.

Ironically, in this first chapter of the book of Acts, God takes a huge step toward bridging that gap – but this time in a healthy way. The Lord sends the Holy Spirit with the goal of uniting all of humanity:

-not in one language, but in one message...

-not through violence and fear, but by through the power of love...

-not by punishing sinners, but by taking away the sin of the world...

Spirit gave them utterance – folks from all over the world heard these very ordinary men speaking in extraordinary ways about Jesus – and in their very own languages...

In just a second I'm going to ask you to hit the PAUSE button again, and think/write/talk about this question:

What do you think these first witnesses said about God's deeds of power? OR What's the one thing that you would have those people say to their neighbors about God's deeds of power?

Ready? **PAUSE**

Welcome back!

The great 20th Century theologian, Karl Barth, was a theological giant in so many ways. He wrote volumes, he lectured often, he eagerly conversed about God and society and the world. *A student once asked Barth if he could summarize his whole life's work in theology in a sentence. Barth allegedly said something like "Yes, I can. In the words of a song I learned at my mother's knee: **Jesus loves me this I know for the bible tells me so...***

From his writings two things are quite clear:

1. When Barth said, **Jesus loves me**, he's NOT saying that the only thing he's concerned about is himself and his standing with God.
2. In fact, I think that Barth would tell us that this truth: **Jesus loves me** is the beginning of helping me – and you – love the world for Jesus' sake.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus says these stirring words: *There is no greater love than this – that people lay down their lives for their friends...*

I'll say that again: *There is no greater love than this – that people lay down their lives for their friends...*

The faith-based organizing ministry we were involved in up in Anchorage was founded on a few key principles – one of which was this short question:

Who do you love??? ***Who would you lay down your life for???***

So, here goes: **If someone asked you that question, how would you answer?**

Here's your chance – I'm going to ask you to answer that very question: ***Who do you love???*** ***Who would you lay down your life for???***

PAUSE

Now, I realize that's an open-ended question, one that can be challenging because the question, ***Who do you love???*** will be answered differently by:

-a teenager looking for a girl-or-boyfriend, whose answer would differ from:

-a parent who beholds their new-born child, whose answer would differ from:

- a couple celebrating 50 yrs. of marriage...whose answer would differ from:
- a child caring for an aged parent...whose answer would differ from:
- two young adults who feel truly, madly, deeply in love...whose answer would differ from:
- members of our military who trust their teammates with their lives...whose answer would differ from:
- medical personnel who trust their EMT/OR/ER/ICU team members...whose answer would differ from:
- police officers...and protesters...and people on the street...

Who do you love...?

Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so...

AND

There is no greater love than this – that people lay down their lives for their friends...

In his famous novel, A Prayer For Owen Meany, the author, John Irving, introduces us to a very unique character. Since birth, Owen Meany is certain that God will use him to accomplish an important task – a task that might very well cost him his life.

Owen does **not** have a death wish, nor are his eyes locked on the prize of being highly regarded for doing something so sacrificial – in fact, I'm pretty sure that he was hoping that at the last hour, at the very last minute (*a forlorn hope*) that God would find a different way to save those whose lives were in danger.

But that's not how his story ends...in the same way that it's not how Jesus' story ends. So Jesus lay down his life for his friends – including you and me – AND including the people with whom we agree – AND including the people with whom we disagree...fundamentally, foundationally, fully disagree...

Jesus died FOR me...Jesus died FOR them...Jesus died FOR you...

Jesus lived, died and rose again...that we might have life, and have it abundantly.

Thanks be to God. Amen.