

Praise of God at Pentecost  
September 26, 2021

This week's Bible Study scripture is from the account of Pentecost in Acts, Chapter 2. The text in our lesson book picks up at verse 32, near the end of Peter's sermon to the crowds after the coming of the Holy Spirit. The focus of the lesson is less on Pentecost itself, than in the listeners' reaction to what has been experienced and said.

I think it's helpful to review what was happening before we get to this reading. Acts 1:1-11 is the ascension of Jesus, elaborating what was given in Luke 24:50-53. The disciples were told to wait in Jerusalem for the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4). So, what did they do in between? They are like good church folks today. They had an organizational meeting. They needed to fill a vacant church office. Judas had left a vacancy. Peter seems to have led this process. The assembled multitude seems to have been 120, perhaps most of the believers in Jesus at that time. The nominating committee came up with names, and Matthias was chosen (1:26). I think this is the last we ever hear of Matthias. The point is, that's the kind of thing that was going on BEFORE the Holy Spirit came. Very likely people were still meeting, going to the temple, and praying and doing other worthy things, but this is all that Luke mentions.

Then the day of Pentecost comes, and things change, dramatically. We read at the beginning of Chapter 2:

### **The Coming of the Holy Spirit**

**2 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.**

**<sup>5</sup> Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup> Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking**

**Galileans? <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” <sup>12</sup> All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” <sup>13</sup> But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”**

So, this is a meeting, much like the one mentioned in Acts 1:15. But instead of human beings controlling the agenda, God did. We don’t understand the mechanics of this miracle. There are natural phenomena that could explain parts of this amazing event. But the overall experience defies explanation according to our understanding of the universe. The tongues of fire could conceivably be a lightning phenomenon like St. Elmo’s fire. But that wouldn’t explained the change that happened in the people, the coming of the Holy Spirit. How is it that all of those from foreign points would hear these rejoicing and speaking of God in their own languages? At least, those with ears to hear did so. Others sneered, saying “They are filled with new wine.”

This is an amazing phenomenon. Peter rises to speak to those in the crowd. We don’t know if he spoke from a window of the house or went outside to address them, likely the latter. We read later that three thousand believed and were baptized (v. 41). So the overall crowd was likely even larger. Keep in mind that the believers in the house had likely numbered about 120 as in that earlier meeting. Peter proclaims the gospel in verses 14 to 36. He ends by answering the question, “Why are these people speaking these in our languages.” It is a demonstration of the Holy Spirit, as promised by Jesus, who is truly the Messiah. So, here’s the reading:

**Acts 2: <sup>32</sup> This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. <sup>33</sup> Being therefore exalted at<sup>[g]</sup> the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. <sup>34</sup> For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,**

**‘The Lord said to my Lord,  
“Sit at my right hand,  
<sup>35</sup> until I make your enemies your footstool.’”**

**<sup>36</sup>Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah,<sup>[h]</sup>this Jesus whom you crucified.”**

## **The First Converts**

**<sup>37</sup>Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers,<sup>[i]</sup> what should we do?” <sup>38</sup>Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup>For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” <sup>40</sup>And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” <sup>41</sup>So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. <sup>42</sup>They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.**

## **Life among the Believers**

**<sup>43</sup>Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup>All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup>they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds<sup>[i]</sup> to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup>Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home<sup>[k]</sup> and ate their food with glad and generous<sup>[i]</sup> hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.**

After Peter’s words there are two different paragraphs. The first addresses the immediate situation. Those hearing ask, **“Brothers,<sup>[i]</sup> what should we do?”** The answer is to join the community of believers, what we have come to call “The Church.” That meant baptism, learning about discipleship, sharing in “breaking of the bread,” and prayer.

The second paragraph, verses 43 to 47, address the somewhat longer term issue of what life was like in the early church in Jerusalem afterward. The material about the early church there in Jerusalem prior to Paul’s appearance in the story is dominated by the story of Peter and John’s activities (Chapters 3-4). In 4:32-37 there is another description of the communal lifestyle in the early church culminating in the introduction of Barnabus. Then there is the Story of Ananias and

Sappira (5:1-11). Not everything is smooth and joyous. 5:12-16 tells of the apostles' healing ministry. But then in 5:17-42, we read of persecution beginning.

In 6:1-6 we read that there was trouble within the church between the Hellenist (Greek speaking Jewish) members and the Hebrew speaking Jewish members. Stephen appears as a “deacon” appointed to deal with administrative matters of taking care of this problem, so that the apostles need not be bothered by it. Now, what I find particularly interesting is that Stephen is full of the Holy Spirit. His appointment is to be an administrative functionary. He doesn't just do his job. Instead, we read, **Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.** (6:8) That was an apostle's job! I think this illustrates the wondrous powers of the Holy Spirit. Who would have imagined that this Stephen would become one of the most important speakers for the Church? He wasn't appointed to do that. But by the Holy Spirit, he did!

Getting back to our lesson, those verses 2:43-46 (and in 4:32-37) are sometimes taken to paint a picture of an ideal church, one that lived in peace and harmony the way God intended. The Ananias story and the problem between the Hellenists and the Hebrews suggest things may not have been as ideal as Luke makes it sound in those verses. Later there will be controversy within the Church over Paul, admitting gentiles, circumcision, and keeping the Law. The early church fathers had to deal with issues of various heresies, persecution, the purchase of church offices (simony) and many other problems. That presence of issues on which different groups of Christians differ seems to have been with us from the beginning. Look at all of the problems Paul cites in his first letter to the Corinthians! That was just one church community. You can see this today in the plethora of different denominations, and factions within those denominations.

This division of the Church has long troubled many Christians. “Why should the Church be divided?” people cry. That's not the way things should be! We should be united! The Catholics are probably the most faithful to that ideal – the Pope has ultimate authority over all Church matters on earth, as I understand it. That has not always worked out well though. If it had, there would have been no need for a Reformation. There have been those who have tried to put the pieces back together with ecumenicalism. That has not worked out so well either.

Yet, for all of the division, the “Diversity” as our lesson writer would have it, the Church in fact does have a unity. It is a unity we find in the teachings of Jesus,

in the Old Testament scriptures, and in the writings of the Gospels and the other New Testament scriptures. In our day, in the United States, denominations get along fairly well. For example, when we have Communion, Rev. Zanicky makes a point of saying, “No one is excluded.” That has not always been the case. In the run up to the War Between the States, denominations split, with one part saying of the other, “You are not my brother (or sister).” That anticipated the war by about 20 years.

So, how do we find Unity rather than Division when the diversity of humanity and within the Church is pressed to the forefront? We come together to Worship God. We need to ask for the Holy Spirit to help us find God’s will, not our will. We need to be ready for surprises when God’s spirit breaks forth in some new way.

The lesson writer points out the utility in all of the different languages, and presumably cultures, represented by those listening at Pentecost. Those represent all of the different places that the Gospel needs to go! The amazing variety within the human race and culture will need a variety of ways of understanding God’s message and love. That can be seen in our Bible! Look at the variety we find there. You have Mathew, Mark and Luke, but then a very different gospel of John. Likewise, Paul’s letters, that to the Hebrews, and the letters of Peter, and of John, are all so remarkably different. We have similar richness of perspectives in the Old Testament as well.

God’s work in humanity is amazing beyond understanding. In Jesus we see enough to get us started in knowing how to live, with the further help of the Holy Spirit. We need to expect that different people’s paths go in different directions. Not everybody is going to do what we think or expect that they should do. We need to view this situation with some humility, and with awe, for the wonder of creation that it is.

*Prayer: O God, we ask for your guidance and wisdom that we may hear what you want us to hear in a way that helps us understand your almighty presence and steadfast love. Amen.*

Note: As of right now, both Cindy and I are sick. I don’t know if we will be present in Church Sunday or not. I hope that those of you who can will still come and have the opportunity to read the scriptures together and discuss the lesson.

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