

The Miracle of Pentecost – Prophecy, Repentance, and Renewal through the Reconciling Spirit

In this morning's scripture reading, we found ourselves transported to a momentous gathering over 2000 years ago.

A small community gathered in one place, sitting together, waiting for a helper to come direct the way forward for a community in a time of transition.

A small community gathered in one place, sharing their hopes and fears, and sharing stories of Jesus of Nazareth, his life, death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven.

A small community gathered in one place, singing songs of praise, and praying to God with words of intercession and thanksgiving.

A small community gathered in one place, situated near a large urban environment composed of many different social, political, and religious groups, all trying to determine their future and their fate in an uncertain time.

A small community gathered in one place, expectant but unsure of **what** to expect next.

“And suddenly” something new comes on the scene. “From heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.” No time to sit now! Maybe fall to the floor in awe or stand in shock, but certainly not sit. And then, if wind wasn't enough, now something resembling “divided tongues” of fire fell upon each one of them. With the violent wind and fire, it was like they were back on Mt. Sinai with Moses (Ex.24)—about to encounter the great and overwhelming presence of God before receiving the gift of the law on tablets of stone—a gift meant to guide them and give them an identity. But this time they were being given a new gift, a spirit to enable all of them, from the oldest to the youngest, to serve with power, to speak prophetically and truthfully for a new age. This Spirit would guide them by a law written on their hearts. This was the Spirit Jesus promised he would send from the Father. He had kept his word. And then the Spirit's manifestation took concrete shape: the disciples began to speak in different languages.

Immediately, this small community all gathered in one place draws a large festival crowd. The Jewish festival of weeks, a wheat harvest festival that Jews through history up to today call Shavuot [Sha-vu-ot], was happening, and the crowds were in town. The festivities were in full swing and yet somehow, a diverse crowd of Jewish folks from surrounding nations heard through the festival noises a sound they did not expect to hear: a small group of locals gathered in one place were speaking words of power in the many differing languages of the festival goers. Something is happening and they cannot ignore it. A large gathering of Jewish pilgrims from all over will now stop to listen to a strange, odd, small group of Jewish locals.

I think the diverse Jewish demographics involved in the event of Pentecost, as well as the festival environment, is fascinating to reflect on, particularly for us, as a small church that belongs to a larger regional body called Mennonite Church Eastern Canada. Of course, there are many differences between the 1st century religious context of Judaism, with its various practices and forms of religious polity, and our own regional practices and polity as MCEC churches. Nonetheless, I think there are some very interesting parallels with the social dynamics playing out at Pentecost and the social dynamics that can play out within our own regional church body in various settings. This morning I want to **consider the events of Pentecost through the lens of the relationship between the disciples—a small prophetic community of Jesus-followers—and the larger community of Judaism in which they practiced their discipleship.** From this I hope to **consider the ways that the specific events surrounding Pentecost continue to have implications for the ways that regional churches, even small ones like ours, might function either like the small band of disciples at Pentecost, as a Spirit-led prophetic voice to our larger regional body; or like the crowd gathered at Pentecost, a gathering of people called to repentance and renewal through the Spirit.**

To begin, let's consider the events of Pentecost first by looking at some of the demographics present during Pentecost. The crowd that gathers around the disciples as they embody God's Spirit is a crowd primarily of Jews. This is evident from the fact that Peter's sermon will be addressed to the Israelites present (Acts 2:22). Granted, there were likely other non-Jews, Gentiles, in the crowd too and it is interesting to think what their perception of what was going on was must have been. But, the fact that the crowd was primarily Jewish should help us see that the events that were about to unfold and the conversation that was about to ensue was a conversation within a diverse religious body that all shared a common tradition and centre of worship, namely the temple which they had all come as pilgrims to for the festival. To oversimplify a comparison to our time, it was as if there was a New Hamburg relief sale going on and Mennonites from all over—diverse as we are in our cultures, lifestyles, dress, worship customs, etc.—were gathering to celebrate the gifts of God given to us and offer up gifts in return to God to be used for good the good of the community. Then, in the midst of this relief sale, one group began attracting large crowds because the Spirit was doing something undeniably important there—and yes, of course, this group was selling strawberry pies. Joking aside, I think it is an interesting analogy to draw us into the story.

But beyond the demographics, what happens next in the story of Pentecost is especially interesting. After the diverse crowd's initial shock of hearing their many different languages spoken, and after supposing that maybe this one small community group had been into the drink, Peter stood up to address them. Now what is Peter, this leader within the Jewish followers of Jesus, going to say to this crowd!?! How does Peter interpret this unexpected movement of the Spirit among them? Pointing back to the prophet Joel, Peter sees this event as the fulfillment of the Prophet's declaration that one day the Spirit would be poured out onto "all flesh." After all,

Joel had spoken of signs “in the heavens above and on the earth below...” and of “fire.” It seemed to add up: violent wind, tongues of fire, and miraculous linguistic abilities manifested by the disciples. This was the day Joel spoke of. But Peter doesn’t stop with Joel. Rather, he pivots almost immediately to Jesus of Nazareth saying:

Acts 2:22-24 22 "You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know-- 23 this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. 24 But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power....33 Being therefore exalted at 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."

For Peter, the Spirit’s coming at this time was no coincidence—it came because Jesus, having gone to heaven, sent the Spirit from the Father. But did you notice the sharp edge to the start of Peter’s sermon? Peter spoke a word of judgment to all who had called for Jesus’ crucifixion. While the text does not make it clear how many of those present in the crowd would have been present among the crowds calling for Jesus’ crucifixion, it is almost assumed that the pilgrims there for Pentecost had been present for the festival of Passover fifty days earlier around the time when Jesus had been condemned and sentenced to death by Pilate. I wonder, then, if we can’t look at Peter’s sermon as a spirit-filled moment of prophetic accountability for that community of worshipers. Peter, filled with the Spirit, honestly named a community failure. Filled with the Spirit, he named for the larger community a moment of corporate unfaithfulness—the rejection of God’s servant Jesus and with him, his Gospel, his Good News.

But Peter doesn’t end with judgment and condemnation. Rather, he issues a hopeful call to repentance:

Acts 2:36-38 36 Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." 37 Now when

they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" 38 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.

Peter's claim that God had vindicated Jesus was not used against the Israelites as a hammer of judgment and condemnation to beat them down. It was, in actuality, God's message of grace proclaimed to them in the Spirit—in ignorance you pushed him away, but I have raised him up and in doing so have given you the chance to make amends. Peter knew the grace of God through Jesus all too well—the risen Jesus, after all, had only days before given him the chance to make amends—to repent and walk in new life. And now the offer extended to the broader community too. Perhaps we could say this, then: **the miracle of Pentecost and the birth of the church produced repentance and social renewal within the community of God. Yes, a new community was about to be birthed—a community of Jews and Gentiles called together in the Spirit, but more immediately, in the events of Pentecost, the miracle was that those that had previously rejected Jesus and his way were now accepting him and living into his way through the Spirit-filled, prophetic ministry of the disciples.**

I wonder how this understanding of Pentecost—Pentecost understood as a miracle of repentance and social renewal, might again relate to our congregational life as a church within the larger regional body we call MCEC. Interestingly, while writing this sermon and thinking about this, I couldn't help but think of a different recent MCEC "festival," not the New Hamburg relief sale but the annual regional church gathering, held at Redeemer University in Hamilton this last April. At that gathering there were many languages spoken and many different peoples representing numerous cultures were present. While there were no singular moments during this festival where one group or a "Peter" stood out among the rest of us and named a particular sin within our midst, the gathering did nonetheless involve significant introspection and reflection

on MCEC's identity and purpose both in larger group and in smaller group gatherings. You might say there were many "Peter's" leading us in reflecting on what the Spirit was 'up to' in MCEC; what a "new Pentecost" might require of us as a community if we are to be faithful to the God who called us.

One of the resolutions passed at the annual gathering was to accept a new MCEC identity statement and priorities [and for those who are curious you can find some of these printed on sheets at the back table in the foyer. For those online, I will include this document with my sermon in the email I will send out next week].¹ Among other items mentioned in this identity statement is a clear statement of purpose, namely, that MCEC churches desire to come together to "energize congregations in worship, discipleship and mission," "encourage leaders of hope, vision and transformation," and "embody God's reconciling ministry for all creation." I am particularly drawn to this third purpose statement this morning on Pentecost, especially as I think of Peter's sermon on the Pentecost after Jesus' ascension: "We come together as a regional church to...embody God's reconciling ministry for all creation."

Peter, empowered by the Holy Spirit, embodied God's reconciling ministry for all creation **by beginning with a prophetic word for his community**. Where was there a community failure? What had they gone wrong? What needed to be done to move forward in repentance? Pentecost and the birth of the church began with a **miracle of reconciliation and social renewal within the community of God** and in many ways that miracle would be a sign of things to come as the church in Acts would become increasingly known as a community that

¹ The resolution to accept this new MCEC identity statement had, in fact, only been tabled or put out for consideration after what was a long period of development through a regional journey of listening to small communities of Jesus followers within MCEC reflect on our identity, purpose, values, and priorities as a regional church. This regional journey of listening was led by our executive minister Leah Reesor-Keller and named "Courageous Imagination," a name meant to encompass MCEC's desire to imagine a way to be church beyond our fears and uncertainties. The small gatherings had been happening beginning in September 2020.

broke down walls of division between peoples previously kept apart and separated through animosity.

Who are the ‘Peters’ that we need to listen to today? Who, if we take the time to open our ears to hear through the noise of our otherwise praiseworthy festivals, might we be surprised to hear speaking in the Spirit to us? Will we listen, even if what is spoken is a difficult word to us? Perhaps we might also find ourselves in Peter’s position from time to time. Perhaps we will be overcome with the Spirit’s power, ready to speak a prophetic word of judgment and hope to our local or regional church, calling it to embody in greater measure God’s reconciling ministry to all creation. I hope that if we find ourselves called to this, we will embrace it, because it is so needed in our world today. We live in a world and yes, in a broader church culture too, that is too often divided and where animosity all too readily spreads. We also live in a world, just like Jesus’ world, where fear of the other moves all too many of us to push people onto crosses. In such a world, the church really can be a sign of God’s reconciling love *if*, and here this really is the challenge, *if* we are willing to respond to God’s new Pentecost among us speaking through prophetic voices, challenging us, and calling us to renewal. May it be so. May we be so willing.

AMEN

Our Hymn of Response is VT #387. In it is a prayer that “one day all unity will be restored,” a fitting prayer following on a Pentecost reflection that has focused on renewal and reconciliation. It is also a fun song to experiment with our diverse language proficiency! Some of you maybe practiced earlier in the week. Our chorister will lead us in English, but I encourage those who would like to, to try out some other languages.