

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, May 28, 2023 // Pentecost, Year A

The Lesson: Acts 2:1-21

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

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound 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." All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.
And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'"

Background and general observations

The Day of Pentecost, along with Christmas and Easter, is one of the three great festivals of the church year for Christians. And since the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles (a continuation of the Gospel of Luke) is one of the best-known passages from the Bible, we're focusing this week's Bible study on the second chapter of the Book of Acts. Of course, the giving of the Holy Spirit is told very differently in John's Gospel: the resurrected Jesus breathes on the disciples and says to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit..." Could it be that the earliest Christians struggled to convey the power of something that overwhelmed them, changed them, and enlivened them? Could these very different stories about the coming of the Holy Spirit be another example of the writer Karen Armstrong's claim that good theology is "a species of poetry," that is, it attempts to express the inexpressible?

The Day of Pentecost is sometimes called "The Birthday of the Church," because it marks the transformation of timid and fearful disciples into empowered and enlivened apostles who end up being the catalysts for the transformation of the world. The Gospel according to Luke begins with the birth of Jesus, and the Book of Acts begins with the birth of the Body of Christ, the Church. We might also note that "In the beginning... a wind from God swept over the waters" (Genesis 1:1-2), and this same wind now descends on the disciples: "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." And just as God brings order out of chaos in the beginning of creation, so it seems that a kind of order and harmony come from what otherwise appears to be a fairly chaotic and disconcerting scene here in the Book of Acts.

The Spirit which was present at the creation of the universe now animates the disciples, and the result is a powerful sense of order emerging from chaos.

Finally, many like to point out that this scene in which many people from different tribes and languages all hear and understand the disciples in their own languages amounts to a kind of reversal of the story of the Tower of Babel, in which various peoples no longer can understand one another and thus are unable to work together. (Genesis 11:1-9) It is interesting in the story of the Tower of Babel that the Lord says about the great achievements of humankind that "this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them." This is the reason the Lord confuses their languages. Now, however, in the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit, we see the inauguration of a new age in which peoples are again united in their hearing and understanding, and we might recall how Jesus said that all things are possible for God, who is now working in them. According to Jesus, they will do greater things than he did, and this seems to be the beginning of the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. This scene in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles is one of power, noise, multiple languages, and so on. It sounds chaotic. In fact, the story says that the crowd was at first "bewildered," and then they were "amazed and astonished."

Consider your own experience of the Holy Spirit. Do you experience the Holy Spirit as powerful and even bewildering, perhaps frightening? Or, do you experience the Holy Spirit as a gentler but no less animating force, as in the story from John's Gospel in which Jesus breathes

on the disciples and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained”? (John 20:21-23)

How would you describe a time in your life when you felt “inspired” or filled by the Holy Spirit?

Does the Holy Spirit come upon us completely unexpectedly, or are there ways to position ourselves so that we are more receptive to the Holy Spirit, just as sails on a boat can be better positioned to receive the wind?

2. It has been said that the central insight of monotheism is that, if there is only one God, then people everywhere are children of this same God. On the deepest level of our being, in other words, we belong to the same God, and we belong to one another.

Pentecost tells of various tribes and languages experiencing an astounding sense of unity, as if this central insight of monotheism is being revealed.

Consider how people become members of different religious movements or what people must do to “belong” to different churches. It is as if a person does not “belong” to a church until certain “requirements” are fulfilled: Baptism, Confirmation, pledging. But what if a church were to say, “All people, no matter what they believe or do, belong equally to this church, because all people belong equally to God. As God’s body on earth, we consider all people, without distinction, to be equal members of this church. Some might wish to ‘claim’ this sense of belonging by being baptized. And still others might want to support this church with their financial gifts, because they want a community like this to thrive—a community in which all belong equally, without distinction.”

How different from your current thinking about your church does that feel to you? Is it your experience that churches spend a lot of time concerned about tending to “membership” and particularly their *own* members? How might a shift in tone, or in priority, affect your own feeling of belonging?

3. “Pentecostal” churches are considerably more “freewheeling” in their worship than churches like the Episcopal Church with its typically well-ordered liturgies. It might remind some of the use of form in poetry or song: a strict form like the sonnet, or the ballad, is often the vessel by which we contain difficult or unwieldy subjects (like love or grief) that cannot be otherwise contained, a way to find order in what would otherwise overwhelm us. Do you believe that the Holy Spirit is more “alive” or active in gatherings that are more emotive and spontaneous? Or can the Holy Spirit be just as alive in liturgical traditions and well-ordered monasteries?

Jesus said that the Spirit is like the wind. You can’t see it, but you can see its effects or signs of its presence (as in the movement of leaves in a tree). What are some of the signs that the Holy Spirit is alive and active in a person or in a group of people?

4. The great reform theologian Martin Luther explained the third article of the creed (about the Holy Spirit) this way:

I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it united with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church day after day he fully forgives my sins and the sins of all believers. On the last day he will raise me and all the dead and give me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.

Commenting on Luther's explanation, a modern pastor has said:

I have frequently described the content of faith as "tentative absolutes." This is what I am absolutely sure about now; but I am open for the Spirit to give new revelations, new insights, new information which might change me and my beliefs tomorrow.ⁱ

How do you respond? Do you need to have the content of faith and the spiritual life a bit firmer and less paradoxical? Or, does this make some sense to you?

ⁱ Brian P. Stoffregen, CrossMarks.com