

Message: "The Power of Common Vision" - 5-24-26

Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

²When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

¹⁴But 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. ¹⁵Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. ¹⁶No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷'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. ¹⁸Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. ¹⁹And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. ²⁰The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. ²¹Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

It happened again. It seems to happen more regularly all the time, at least to me. I was walking along a street, moving from point A to point B. I saw a person coming toward me; he said something, which I didn't quite catch, whereupon I said something like "I'm sorry?" which is understood to be the universal statement of "could you please repeat what you just said?"; he turned to me with a look of shock on his face, as if I had antennae sprouting out of the back of my head; he said something like "yes, can I help you?" and I said something along the lines of "Oh, I thought you were saying something to me," and he said, "oh no, I wasn't" - which was precisely when I noticed a little earpiece sticking out of his ear - he was talking to someone online. We both felt embarrassed and quickened our walk away from each other just in case we accidentally began a real conversation.

Stuff like this happens more and more all the time, doesn't it? But this is not just an experience confined to our modern-day, technologically-advanced world; I believe that something quite similar was happening on that day of Pentecost we just read about. Not that the disciples and followers of Jesus had ear buds in their ears or anything like that - but they were hearing different messages in different languages, seeing different visions, strange things that were hard to make sense of. It was almost as if God was speaking something so new into the world that its first affect was disorientation.

God does this a lot in the Bible stories of old, and not just through words and language. God does and says disorienting things. We see God speaking out of a burning bush, through a rainbow, in the bray of a donkey, and through tablets of stone; God speaks through the rush of mighty winds and the movement of water, through a sun locked in the sky and a star made stationary over a stable; God speaks through curiosities such as these, and leaves those paying attention filled with a bewildering wonder.

But God also speaks through stillness and silence, through visions and dreams and prophecies interpreted by unlikely figures and imperfect heroes. God speaks through impossible births and incredible healings and remarkable feedings and water-walking excursions. And, of course, God speaks through people - all kinds of people, all kinds of figures, from kings and queens and Roman governors and the highest ranking religious leaders, to the poorest of the poor and the most outcast of outcasts; he speaks through the greatest sufferers of life, the Jobs and the Johns and the Naomi's and the Mary's. In fact, God seems to speak especially through figures of lowliness, those struck by poverty and exclusion, those hobbled by pain and diminished by struggle. Those whose very station in life is shunned by the world often have a greater ear for God's voice; yet perhaps God speaks the same to them as to everyone but they hear much more clearly what God has to say; it's as if they have much more space in their lives for the mystery of God to dwell - a mystery that embodies a hope they cannot find in the world. Neediness creates longings for things that the world will not or cannot provide; in such longings, one begins to learn how to listen with more than the ears, to listen with the heart and soul and life to what God is saying that we all need to hear. There is a reason most prophets and sages of our faith and the faiths of the world were less of this world due to circumstance and lack of privilege - for they likely had a heart much less compromised by material interference.

God has always spoken in such ways, using a tremendous variety of persons and their experiences to communicate with us all - and Pentecost, in a way, brings this all to an especially clear light. That crazy scene of long ago was SOP (standard operating procedure) for God to be able to effectively connect with a likewise crazy world. God joins our fray because we have no hope of joining God's reality on our own. It is for this reason that we are given a clear message of God's preference for variety, for complexity, and for diversity - perhaps for the main reason that an infinite God cannot be approached in any other way. Approaching an infinite God requires exploring as many avenues as possible to

learn more, grow more, live more, and love more about God; variety is God's chosen way to reveal Godself to the world.

This brings us to what the Pentecost moment injects into our present reality, our present faith understanding of who God is and how God works. And perhaps the most pressing matter is reduced to a simple question: How does God speak to us today? How does God speak to us in our present world?

This is incredibly important because there's a lot of confusing talk going on in the world right now. A lot of government leaders are saying one thing and then doing another; a lot of politicians are engaged in extremely obvious double-speak; a lot of loud voices are vilifying the other side; a lot of angry words are casting blame and animosity in multiple directions. And there are many, many voices saying they speak for God in one way or another when they advocate things questionable at best and immoral at worst. These voices have one thing in common - they attempt to paint a gray world in black and white; they attempt to reduce human complexity to divine simplicity for personal gain. This is always wrong. These are voices shaped by the myopia of generalized self-interest, where one's desires or one's perspective or one's opinion or one's party determines the validity of what they express. They often attempt to concretize their point of view by soliciting God's approval for their personal agenda, which is a form of blasphemy. Nothing could be more powerful than an idea that carries God's stamp of approval - but so many of their efforts at divine approval miss the fundamental nature of God to one of grace; God's nature is to be primarily concerned for those left behind, those not entitled nor benefited by the ways of the world. The marginalized are always precious in God's sight, and, whenever humans fail to see this, they are working against God.

Those who claim God's favor, those who claim to speak for God, must always be held to this test: how embracing are they of the diversity God prioritizes? We are each multi-faceted beings of multiple varieties in and of ourselves; none of us is reducible to one idea, sentiment, rationale, experience, or perspective. God's alignment is with this complexity; God's companionship embraces diversity. Diversity of languages, cultures, religions, genders, and perspectives; diversity of experiences, economics, geographies, and histories. God finds precious the many ways we humans experience reality; and God's love is big enough to connect with them all. It is in understanding this nature of God that we find our natural place in God's creation, moving into this kind of respect and appreciation and fellowship with diverse lives embracing one thing in common - God's love for us all. It is

precisely when we lose sight of that love that the world goes so terribly wrong and we become something opposed to God; and it is as we gain once more a sense of that love - and live into that love - that the world can once again go right.

I checked my grandfather meter recently and realized I haven't spoken about my grandchildren in a few weeks, so I'll fix that right now -- for their everyday innocence naturally appreciates the diversity that saturates creation. It was a few weeks ago when I was watching our granddaughter Alva and grandson Sammy (six years old and four years old, respectively) in our back yard, doing something that caused them tremendous anxiety followed by giggles of joy - they were turning rocks over to see what lies beneath. It was quite a process; they'd go together to find a fairly good-sized rock in our garden, they'd look it over and poke it a few times; then, they'd grab the edge and turn it over - and jump back at what they saw. Rolly-pollies and ants and worms; millipedes and centipedes and slugs. But then, after observing for a few moments, they couldn't help themselves; they began to draw closer, to watch the mysterious underside of things move about, to touch a worm or let a roly-polly tickle the back side of their hand. The diversity of life under a rock absolutely captivates their attention every time; their sense of wonder is spontaneous, their excitement palpable, as they see a side of life they hadn't seen before - and appreciate how wonderful it is. All made possible by surmounting their fears together, turning the rocks over together, and discovering together the complexity and variety of this beautiful world.

To me, it highlights an obvious truth - that God has made us to do this life thing together, to explore this creation in the bonds of curiosity, wonder, and love; it is when we sow division and exclusion that we move against life and away from God. We become idol-makers when we turn from the variety of our world in judgement and attempt to reduce God to something of our own understanding. Jesus came to the world to remind us that God has given us a common vision, a vision which is able to guide diversity into genuine fellowship; God has given us common priorities to inspire our diverse expressions. This is what our faith promotes, directly from Jesus himself. Engaging with a wide spectrum of individuals and economic brackets and cultures and faith perspectives on the level of our common human grounding brings us closer to God. Diversity is not something to be feared as much as it is to be explored as God's creative self-expression; it is in the varieties of the world that we discover more about the God who is a part of us all.