

Gathered and Scattered (Pentecost)

Weekly Prayer

Living God, you have created all that is. Send forth your Spirit to renew and restore us, that we may proclaim your good news in ways and words that all will understand and believe. Amen.

Focus Reading

Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, they 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.'"

Reflection by Mark Suriano

I remember attending my first General Synod in 1997 just after I joined the United Church of Christ national staff. The few months I had been at work there were spent preparing for the event: meetings were held, conversations were had, plans were made on the design of the booth and what we were going to distribute, and in general the building was humming with activity. In those months leading up to the Synod a lot of questions were answered, except for one that kept

nagging at me, "So, what IS a General Synod?" Having come to the United Church of Christ only four years earlier, I had never experienced it! The usual answers were given about the delegates and the voting, the booths and the visitors, but I felt only somewhat satisfied by what I heard. It wasn't until AFTER it was all over that I got any sense of the General Synod as a family gathering of sorts, an event that only made sense by experiencing it, by being surrounded by the sights, sounds, music, conversations and business that was all going on often at the same time.

I imagine the first disciples gathered for worship "all together in one place" on that morning of Pentecost had a similar journey and similar questions regarding when this Spirit that Jesus promised would come and what that would be like. Unlike my preparations for General Synod, those first followers were not given a time line, only a promise. They were living their lives in the vagueness of "something coming" rather than the secure knowledge of an event to be planned for, and they were busy living their lives as faithful followers in light of that approaching time.

They had gathered there for the Jewish festival of Pentecost--also called Shavuot or Weeks--the third of three major festivals called for in Deuteronomy 16. The festival, according to Deuteronomy, occurs seven weeks following the day the sickle is first put to the grain and is a celebration of harvest and the giving of the first fruits to God. The significance of the day for the passage from Acts, Margaret Aymer writes, is in its connection "to Jesus' declaration that 'the harvest is plenty but the laborers are few' (Luke 10:2). It may have also connected them to the Joel passage... for in Joel a precursor to the outpouring of the spirit is the harvest: 'the threshing floors shall be full of grain' (Joel 2:24a)."

Preparation and fulfillment

For much of the Easter Season those of us who have been using the lectionary readings have been dancing around the concepts of "fulfillment" and "preparation." Our Sunday worship has included passages on encouragement--the promise just a few Sundays ago of the Advocate Spirit--and in a series of readings from the Acts of the Apostles about the wild spread of a good news that turned the tables on some well-cemented notions of who the covenant with God was for. (Remember Peter's vision in Acts 10 of the table cloth with all the beasts and grains from the earth? Or even Paul's unusual and powerful interaction in Acts 16 with Lydia and the women at the river in Macedonia?) All this soil-tilling has led us up to this liturgical moment--an actual reverse of how it happens in the Scripture--of Pentecost where the firstfruits are a renewed community proclaiming a renewed covenant for all people.

Those disciples gathered in Acts 2 were faithful Jews looking for a Jewish messiah, and when the spirit came they became ambassadors of a more universal experience of God that found its roots in some of the later prophetic traditions of the bible. Their experience and anticipation of what it was to be a follower of Jesus were enfolded by this renewed appreciation of that tradition, perhaps over and against other more militant and exclusivist traditions. The effect of the first Pentecost, then, may not be new birth, but rebirth, not a new covenant but a renewed covenant that would change the hearts and minds of the disciples and renew the face of the earth!

This is good news for us 21st century Christians as we approach the feast of Pentecost. The same Spirit of God that warmed the hearts of those disciples on the road to Emmaus and inspired the

tongues of those gathered in Jerusalem is looking to inspire a rebirth within us. The same Spirit that led Isaiah to envision a holy mountain for all people, and John of Patmos to witness a city with no walls and no temple, is breaking in to our cloudy consciousness and sending us out as ambassadors of a renewed earth. Are our communities and congregations experiencing the personal and social renewal inspired by the Spirit of God that will lead to these things? Are we, like those first faithful followers, awaiting this kind of Pentecost?

The Church's Great Rummage Sale

In her book, *The Great Emergence*, Phyllis Tickle reflects on what she sees as the regular "garage sale" that the church experiences every 500 years or so. She, and others, look at the church today and see the possibility that we are in fact in the middle of one of those cosmic, inspired, rummage sales: a refocusing of our hearts and minds on what the good news means in our own day, while honoring the contributions of those who have gone before us. Tickle and others see this as a time of great renewal for the church and the churches, an opportunity for re-examination of the fundamental questions and a re-commitment to a renewed living of our faith. Is it perhaps a time for our "sons and daughters to prophesy," for our "young to dream dreams and our old to see visions," for an outpouring of Spirit that calls from tomorrow overwhelming our preconceived notions and neat perceptions in favor of the expansive and inclusive reign of God?

When we look at this passage from Acts 2 we are struck with the "overflowing-ness" of the experience. As the passage begins we hear that the "day had come," but what the Greek actually says is that the day is "fulfilled"! Rebecca Kruger Gaudino reminds us that the verbs used in the passage are all verbs of saturation that lead us to a sense to completeness of the event. The time is fulfilled, a sound "like a violent wind" fills the house, and all who were in the house were themselves "filled with the Spirit." The event doesn't just cover some of those present, but the "entire house" was filled, a "tongue as of fire rested on each of them" and "all of them were filled."

The drama of the day is so overwhelming that it is not even reserved for those who are gathered inside. The list of nationalities in Jerusalem that day reads like a list of the conquered countries that comprised the Roman Empire. All those Parthians, Medes and Elamites as well as the others can feel and hear something going on in that room and they begin to crowd the place where the disciples are. These conquered peoples, who have had their homelands and languages taken away (they would have all had to learn Greek, the Roman military and commercial language), their national and social identities subsumed by Rome, were immigrants now living in Jerusalem. Used to following the Roman way, Margaret Aymer writes, they left their own languages and customs to the privacy of their own homes, adopting the expected conformity in the streets and shops of the Empire.

"A divine sanction to multilingualism and translation"

But when the Spirit comes upon those first disciples, and tongues as of fire separate and hover above them, they neither speak in the common language of the day, nor in the "spiritual utterances" that St. Paul in 1 Corinthians associates with the gifts of the Spirit, but in the native

languages of the people now gathered around the house where they were. In turn, all those gathered hears the good news of rebirth and renewal spoken to their hearts and souls in the language they would have heard first at birth. While not a reversal of the events at the Tower of Babel, we might be able to see that Pentecost is the undoing of the effects of sin that Babel represents. The confusion of languages in Genesis 11 is a response to the growing pride of humanity trying to reach to the heavens (to be like God?); the confusion of languages at Pentecost adopts the reality of Babel but recreates it into a means for God to share covenant relationship with all the peoples of the earth. Again, Aymer writes: because the church was to "bear witness to the ends of the earth in the languages of all the people of the earth, on the day of Pentecost, Christianity became a movement with a divine sanction to multilingualism and to translation."

Even in an age of mass communication and a world shrunk by the ease of access many of us enjoy, we are not in any less danger of acting more like the Roman Empire than the renewed Community of God. In our lives and in our churches we can experience a kind of hardening that comes from a faith that is stuck in a moment of time—whether that moment was four days or four centuries ago. It is just as difficult for us to find a way to be faithful to the covenantal relationship that has some history to it, while inviting and seeking a new experience of Spirit which saves us from the idolatry of thought and expression that can make a church a repository rather than a living community. As we look around our congregations can we see and name the many languages of God and rejoice that God has chosen to speak to us in the deep and many languages of our hearts, and not the uniform monologue of a world marching in lock-step?

The Language of God

Not long ago, the United Church of Christ released a web-based message. For weeks before its launch we were encouraged and invited to wait for the debut of "The Language of God" and its message that God is still speaking. The idea was to allow the message to "go viral" by encouraging it to be shared in ever-widening circles so that others could get an experience of a church family whose life is a Pentecost moment. Not unlike those who were gathered on that Pentecost day, the Spirit can enter into our church walls blowing among us and settling upon us and unsettling our thinking, empowering us to be renewed and to be renewal for the world. Like those who first experienced the Resurrection and those who were present that day at Pentecost, and like all those who came after them--the saints and the mystics, the reformers and the poets, the lovers and the theologians, the everywoman and everyman whose lives were good news, we are this day living in anticipation of our own rebirth and for the renewal of the world into the Community of God.

On Pentecost, may you find your heart singing with the Spirit of God, your ears humming with the voice of the Spirit speaking in a language that reaches deep into your soul and wisdom dawning on your mind so that the shackles that have hardened around your mind may be broken, and God's voice and language set free. May your communities and churches experience the coming of God's Spirit, anticipate it with joy and hope, give in to it with love, so that when the day is done all the world may know the love of God because of you!