

“WOULD THAT ALL THE LORD'S PEOPLE WERE PROPHETS”

A Sermon on Numbers 11:24-30, Acts 2:1-21, and John 7:37-39 for Pentecost Sunday – June 4, 2017 by Gregory A. Goodwiller Sumner, MS

They were “amazed and astonished,” the writer of Acts comments, even “perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ ” It certainly wasn’t what those “onlookers” *expected* to see that day, or what they expected to be *doing*.

They had come to town, those faithful Jews from all around the Roman Empire, for a *festival* – the feast called “Pentecost.” It was an old Jewish feast, also known as the Feast of Weeks, because it began when a “week of weeks;” that is, seven “sets” of seven, or forty-nine days, had passed since the Passover Sabbath — on the fiftieth day after the Passover, in other words – hence, in Greek, “*Pentecost*.”

Pentecost signaled the beginning of the wheat harvest. I suppose its most direct parallel for us would be our celebration at about this time each year, of the arrival of the first home grown tomatoes at the farmer’s market, or in our personal gardens – which, by the way, we enjoyed at our house last week – *surely* reason to celebrate!

And they celebrated the holiday joyously and *vigorously* in Jerusalem.

As a matter of fact, because the weather in early June was much more favorable for traveling than the weather in April, even more Jewish families from around the Roman empire were known to come to Jerusalem for Pentecost in those days than for the Passover itself, which explains the great “roll call” of nationalities in the Pentecost story in Acts.

The highlight of the celebration was the offering of loaves made from the new wheat, which (unlike the loaves in the Passover celebration) were ordinary, *leavened* loaves — the *only* time leavened bread was ever offered in the Temple, actually.

And so the Feast of Pentecost was a “seasonal” celebration in Israel, based (as were its *other* feasts) on the agricultural calendar. It was a feast rich with symbols and meaning. It was a time when “daily bread” and the gift of sustenance were celebrated. And in both synagogue services and Jewish homes, the book of *Ruth* was read for devotion and reflection.

Ruth is a wonderful story in our Old Testament about men and women at their best, living simple lives of care and concern for others. And it tells of how God *used* those regular, ordinary people to help bring about the fulfillment of the ancient promises made to Abraham.

The setting of Ruth is, appropriately, the time of the wheat harvest, and the gist of the story is that although he is absolutely not *obliged* to do so, a Jewish landowner named Boaz grants Ruth (who is a foreigner, not a child of Israel) permission to “glean” in his fields, a simple act of *kindness* as an example of the faithful living out of the law of Moses and its emphasis on hospitality and charity.

As the story *ends*, readers learn that this woman, Ruth (who, in turn, has taken good care of her mother-in-law Naomi despite no legal obligation on her part to do so), is none other than the great grandmother of Israel’s great king, David.

So in celebrating the holiday of Pentecost, faithful Jews celebrated the reality that *every* member of their community was important, not just their leaders – not just the priests and the kings. And they were reminded that by being hospitable and charitable, and following the law of Moses, everyone could render faithful service to God.

Now in the first place, I would like to suggest that God's choice of the day of Pentecost as the day for the Holy Spirit’s dramatic arrival was no accident.

Just as God used regular, ordinary folks like Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz to help bring about the *creation* of the nation of Israel, so God chose some very regular, ordinary people to become “empowered” by the Spirit, and form the core of the new Christian Church - not the high priest or the governor, but some fishermen, a tax collector, some housewives. Just “folks,” like you and me, and folks from a wide variety of “walks of life.”

And the Spirit descended and was “distributed . . . *on each one of them*. And they were *all* filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak.” Oh, Peter was

still their “leader,” and he preached on their behalf that morning. But the point is, the Spirit did not descend *only* on Peter. The Spirit was *distributed*, it says. The *power* of the Spirit was “divided up” *equally* among them. No one was any more or any less important than anyone else, no one’s *part* was any more or less significant.

And that had *always* been the theme of Pentecost. It was the holiday that celebrated *everyone’s* contribution. It celebrated “agriculture” and “hospitality,” as well as *devotion*, and the *law of God* – by which *all* of God’s faithful were known. And that is *still* the theme of Pentecost – that we are *all* called to be God’s witnesses, and to tell of God’s “mighty deeds,” each in our own way, using our particular gifts.

The Lectionary pairs the story of the Day of Pentecost for this morning with a very rich story from Israel’s history . . . from the book of *Numbers*. It is a much more *typical* Old Testament story, because its focus is on Israel’s leaders – the chosen ones who God used as spokespersons – Moses, Joshua, and “the seventy.”

They were the ones, in days of old, who heard God’s voice, received God’s Spirit, were *close* to God, in other words, and who should therefore be obeyed, and followed.

As it is told in that story, God’s spirit was *mostly* just with Moses in those days – and on one occasion when Go’s spirit “remained” with a couple of others, Joshua (who was to become Moses’ *successor*, after all) was quite *upset* about it! How *dare* they! “My lord Moses, stop them!”

And I Love Moses’ response – that foretells our Christian Pentecost story: “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that *all* the LORD's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!”

Don’t judge Joshua too harshly. His perspective was the Old Testament *system*, where God selected *particular* people to be prophets, priests, and kings – to “oversee” the peoples’ relationships with God, and with each other. *They* heard God’s voice. They were therefore *closest to God*, and so they were in charge. They, in turn, appointed leaders who were “under” them, and reported *to* them, in a strict hierarchy with Moses – or a high priest, or a King – at the top.

On the Day of Pentecost in Acts, that whole system changed, with respect to matters of religion and faith. Moses' dream as he expressed it to Joshua came true that day.

For us Presbyterians, at least, what the story of the Day of Pentecost means is that *everyone* has a "measure" of Christ's Spirit, and therefore has a legitimate *voice* in the church – something to say, something to offer.

At the same time, Reformed theology professes, until Christ returns in glory at the end of time, it is *also* the case that *no one* hears God's voice *perfectly*. There is no longer any "Moses" who can go up on the mountain and "see God face to face."

And so we believe that the Church is first of all a *community* of individuals whose lives are inextricably entwined, not because we are a "physical" family of common descendants, but because we are a "spiritual" family with a common bond of faith and commitment.

And then second, we believe that leadership and decision making in our community is a *shared* task. Christ is the *only* "head" of the Church. But we are served by leaders who are elected – usually for specific "terms" of office, and those individuals can always be "replaced" by the body if it so desires. And we deliberate and make decisions *together*.

We don't always do that well, but what the story of the Day of Pentecost says to me is first that we *can* do it – make decisions together – in fact, we are *called* to deal with our disagreements in such a way: honestly, openly, giving everyone a voice, and every elected leader and representative a vote – because we *all* have a portion of the Holy Spirit's presence.

And then second, that we can *trust* in the Spirit to lead us, ultimately, to where we need to be. Our essential faith story about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus teaches us that the "victory is won," and so it's just a matter, now, of bringing God's reign into the world. And in a world with so much division and hatred, so little "visible unity," that will continue to be messy business for the foreseeable future. But God is in charge. Christ is "on the throne." And so we *know*, we Christians, that Christ will prevail.

On the Day of Pentecost, those who witnessed the Spirit's arrival to be with the Church were "amazed and astonished" at what they saw. I invite you to also be

amazed and astonished at what God has done and is doing in this church family, in the Christian Community generally, in the world.

God is here, and God is at work. In your common life, and in all of our lives. That is the Pentecost message. Praise be to God.