

A Sermon for the Feast of Pentecost 2014

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Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

Today is the feast of Pentecost, the fiftieth and last day of Eastertide. The word Pentecost simply means “fifty days,” and the disciples, you may have noticed, were observing the Jewish Pentecost – fifty days after Passover, when a very strange thing happened. This strange thing, the coming of the Holy Spirit into their lives, had been promised by Jesus, but the way in which the Spirit showed up was completely unexpected. But then, when is the time or the nature of a visit from the Holy Spirit ever exactly as expected?

This wild experience – a rush of wind, tongues of flame dancing over the heads of Jesus' friends, and newfound linguistic abilities – sets a high bar for extraordinary experiences. I don't know about you, but I've never had a spiritual experience anywhere near that strange, surprising, or hard to comprehend.

But this strange, surprising, incomprehensible story is one of the founding narratives of our faith. Some even go so far as to call that first Christian Pentecost the birth of the church. Whether you agree with that idea or not, it's certainly true that Pentecost is the birthday of evangelism.

And what I think is worth paying attention to most of all in the Pentecost story is not the wind, or the tongues of flame, or even the disciples' uncanny ability to speak in all of those languages, but this simple fact. Everyone who was there heard the Good News in words they were able to understand.

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That is a remarkable thing, isn't it? Nowadays, there's hardly a human language into which scripture hasn't been translated, but still, I dare say, there are people all around us who have never heard the Good News in words they were able to understand.

The problem, I think is twofold.

First off, a lot of the time, if we are saying anything at all, we are telling the wrong story. We're not telling the same Good News the disciples did.

Or rather, we are telling the exact same Good News they did, as it has been passed down to us in scripture. But that's not the story the disciples told – they didn't retell the stories they were given – they told their own stories, new stories, about how God's overwhelming love had transformed them. They told what a difference Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension had made in their lives. And as they

told stories of their transformation, they practiced transformed and transforming lives that told the story even better than their words.

If we want to bring God's love to the world, and the world to God's love, we need to become much better at telling our own stories of how we have experienced God's Love, how Jesus' rising has raised us, of how the Holy Spirit has danced into our lives in unexpected ways.

But the other part of the problem is this: When we ever do tell the stories of our own walk with God, we are not very good at telling those stories in languages other people who are different from us can understand. We are not very good at translating our own gospel truth into the language of science, or of hip hop, or of first-generation immigrant, or even of our own children. And so our churches grow, if they do grow, not by bringing the Good News to those whose languages and cultures are different from ours, but by receiving those who already speak our language, including our language of faith. We can get people who have fallen away from church to come back sometimes, and we can get people who have been separated from their churches by geography or by disagreement, but we seldom reach anyone new. With one exception.

Today we are baptizing four very young children. This is the traditional way to achieve church growth, and it worked for a long time. But if we were to rely solely

on our ability to be fruitful and multiply to build up the Body of Christ, it would be a doomed endeavor.

For, sad to say, many, many even of those born and baptized into our churches fall away in adulthood never to return. And the reason for this goes back to my first point. The children we welcome into the fold through baptism still need to be evangelized. The need to hear the stories of our own journeys of faith, our struggles, our doubts, our joy and our renewal and transformation, told in language they can understand, telling those stories again and again, and adapting our language as their understanding grows. Sunday School can teach them the stories that have been handed down to us, but it can't teach them the stories of the ways that the Good News has touched and continues to touch the lives of those closest to them.

But we can.

And perhaps, if we practice tell our stories to our children in language they can understand, we will be better equipped to translate and retranslate the Gospel written in our own lives into Good News the whole world can understand.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!