

Acts 2:1-11

May 15, 2016

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jane showed up at Marjorie's door early one morning. Marjorie was in the last stages of a terminal illness. "The church asked me to stop by and pray with you," explained Jane. After a few minutes of conversation, Marjorie tearfully revealed that she had prayed to God for support and reassurance, but that she felt "alone, as if God has forgotten me."

"Marjorie," Jane responded, "you need to believe that God sent me. Maybe I'm the way God showed up and answered your prayers. I'm here to try to say what God has been trying to say to you during all these difficult days, 'I love you. I'm with you. No matter what. I won't let you go.'"

Jane's comment catches some of the power of service to a Holy Spirit who settles upon and empowers witness, even in the church.<sup>1</sup> Giving voice to the gospel of Jesus Christ can be rather challenging can't it? Jane's story is a remarkable one about the power of the Holy Spirit to bring the presence of Christ into the midst of an extremely difficult environment and proclaim the good news to Marjorie that she wasn't alone, that she was loved by God and that God will not let her go. Yet, how many of us, myself included, have found ourselves in perhaps a similar situation and are left asking, "I don't know what to say."

In the second chapter of Acts, we find Peter along with the other disciples once again gathered together “in one place” as the text tells us. We have witnessed this before in the gospel accounts; especially, following the death of Jesus. Often, we attribute this to fear of being handed over to the authorities as Jesus was and enduring the same fate He did. Fear that led them to retreat into the safe confines of closed doors and walls. Or we may attribute it to shame as they failed to speak up on Jesus’ behalf prior to his death and cowardly left Him to die on the cross. Yet, perhaps they are gathered together for support and strength. Perhaps, they are gathered together to share stories of their time with Jesus and to feel His presence yet among them. The events that took place as they were together in one place occurred shortly after Jesus’ ascension to be with His Father. And it is into their togetherness the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them, just as Jesus had promised time and time again to them.

And it wasn’t just the disciples the Holy Spirit is poured out upon but rather a very large and diverse group of people. We have a mixture from the most devout of Judeans adhering the strictest regulations of the laws of Moses to those Judeans on the fringes of Galilee who were looked upon as vastly different and much more liberal in their understanding of the law. They, like the proselytes mentioned, were outsiders, strangers. There were a host of people gathered when this miraculous first Pentecost occurred and somehow and somehow all the differences they came with were put aside and they understood one another. In that moment, the text tells us, “The Spirit gave

them the ability.” To speak to one another with understanding. To listen to the other and understand. To prophesy to one another and proclaim to one another words about God’s deeds of power. Jesus, though dead, raised, and ascended to be with His Father was at hand via the power of the Holy Spirit and once again God was doing a new thing. God was creating. God was overcoming differences that divide and separate. God was breaking down barriers. God was revealing God self to be a God to all and not just some. God was showing that diversity is indeed a hallmark of the new church, which was being birthed into life on this first Pentecost.

And then something else remarkable happens. Peter, whom we last saw silent before the servant girl who asked him if he knew Jesus, not stands up, raises his voice, and delivers a sermon even in the midst of opposition. Peter turns to one of the prophets of old, Joel and it was the prophets that were filled with God’s Spirit but now Peter proclaims Joel’s prophecy has come to fruition as all people are now filled with the Spirit. And he goes on to proclaim the saving power of Jesus Christ to those who stood alongside and failed to believe what was happening around them. Peter, once silent, is speaking confidently and boldly.

At our annual meeting in January I asked a couple questions to all who were gathered which basically said, “What is God’s dream for Bethany Lutheran into the future?” We talked about these responses at our Council Retreat last month. There

were many themes lifted up but a central one pertained to evangelism – going beyond these doors and this building and proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.

While there are a plethora of books, studies, and resources available on how to do this I think one thing the church often overlooks and fails to call upon is the power of the Holy Spirit. Just like Jane in our opening story, we are the sent people of God.

When we gather together the Holy Spirit meets us, fills us, and indeed does equip and empower us to go forth and proclaim God's mighty deeds – most importantly what God has done through the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. We may indeed feel inadequate or without the proper words to say; however, we have to believe and trust we are not alone. Just like Peter, once silent, overcome by fear, and then filled with and moved by the Holy Spirit we too are given the power to move beyond our fears, doubts, and lack of words to be voices to the world. Voices that proclaim God's love. Voices that bear witness to God's presence. Voices that call out for justice and peace. Voices that speak against voices that spew hatred, violence, racism, and promote exclusivity rather than inclusivity. . Voices that are gathered together, fed and filled by the Holy Spirit with the bread of life and word of God, and voices that are then sent by that same Spirit – sent to confidently and boldly proclaim of God's love for all God created.

We can read all the books we want about evangelism but it all starts with the God's Spirit and our need to call upon that Spirit with a prayer. A prayer such as this,

“Let us pray. Lord, I (we) don’t know what to say. Please put the right words in my (our) mouth that my (our) words might be helpful to my neighbor in need.”

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<sup>1</sup> Unknown author. Taken from May 15, 2016 commentary in *Will Willimon’s Pulpit Resource* (Abingdon Press, 2016)