

**June 4, 2017 (Pentecost)**

**TEXT: Acts 2:22–24, 36–42**

**TITLE: Pentecost Devotion**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

I've got two Pentecost sermons for you, but I'm not sure which one I should preach. And don't be a smartaleck and shout out "the shorter one"; I assure you they are both the same length. Ultimately sermons should present ideas you can remember and put into practice. The point of preaching is to disturb or inspire or convict the listeners so they will lead lives of faithful witness to Jesus Christ. I'm just not sure which sermon on today's passages best fits that requirement.

The first sermon is more dramatic; the second sermon is more reflective. The first sermon focuses on the wild, amazing, creative energy of the Day of Pentecost long ago. It highlights all the familiar-yet-inconceivable details of Pentecost: the rush of a violent wind; the disciples touched by descending tongues of fire; the sudden ability to speak in different languages and how the disciples poured out into the Jerusalem crowds to put their new-found linguistic skills to good use. We read those details from Acts 2 every year like we're describing a commonplace event—but we don't really understand what happened that day. Not exactly. It was clearly something unusual, miraculous, transformative, and beyond the ability of words to fully describe. It was also something that, I'd wager, none of us has experienced – not the lifelong Presbyterians at least. Pentecost sounds wonderful—yet also unsettling, disarming—being blown by the Holy Spirit literally into a whole new chapter of life. So the first sermon focuses on all those details, but what if you haven't felt the wind and fire and spirit quite like they did on Pentecost. How will you then put that sermon into practice?

The second sermon focuses on what Peter actually spoke about once the wind died down, once the speaking in tongues and general commotion all came to an end. It's interesting to note what he said on that amazing day. Basically he just talked about Jesus. He said Jesus was a person of wonder and power, a person handed over and crucified, and a person resurrected, freed from the power of death. We routinely tell that same story here in church, but in Peter's day that had to be a powerful message for the Pentecost crowd long ago. His listeners were Jews and other believers in monotheism, in one God. They likely had heard about the rabbi from Nazareth who seven weeks earlier had been tried and crucified and reportedly had come back from the dead. Peter doesn't take time to say who he himself is and why people should believe him. Nor does he offer fresh evidence to convince them that Jesus is truly alive. He just tells it like it is: Jesus lived, acted, was killed, and yet is now the risen Lord and Messiah. This second sermon built around Peter's message feels like a more straightforward message to preach; but in its own way, it too involves a story that is wonderful, amazing, unsettling and disarming. And again the question needs to be asked: If you truly believe all these things about Jesus, how will you put those beliefs into practice?

The first sermon, with its focus on the dramatic side of Pentecost, has one particular detail working in its favor. There's the great description early in Acts 2 of how the disciples went out evangelizing in a mixed crowd of Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Cretans, Arabs and others. And even though they were sent out by the power of God's Holy Spirit, that didn't guarantee they found a totally receptive audience waiting for them. Some of the folks in the crowd were amazed; others were just plain rude and cynical. Some wanted to understand this miraculous event; others tried to dismiss it by sneering, "They are drunk with new wine."

Why isn't it easier to spread the Christian gospel? Why is it that human beings aren't fundamentally, constitutionally, more receptive to Christian faith? If God can send out disciples into a mixed crowd on the Day of Pentecost, why couldn't God make everyone in that crowd immediately become a follower of Jesus? As soon as we ask that question, we realize where the flaw is in our logic. First off, scripture tells us that those dozen, Spirit-filled disciples made about 3000 converts that day and here we are complaining that the total wasn't 3001. That seems a bit ungrateful. It's like one of Garrison Keillor's favorite jokes about a little boy and his grandmother walking along the seashore when a huge wave appears out of nowhere and swept the child out to sea. The grandmother falls to her knees and say, "God, please return my beloved grandson. Please, send him back safely." And behold, another huge wave washes in and deposits the little boy on the sand at her feet. She picked him up, looked him over, and looking up at the sky said, "He had a hat too!" We should never be ungrateful for God's many blessings.

Back to our original question We asked: *Why can't God make everyone believe?* Well, you can't make someone believe. Faith doesn't work that way. God doesn't work that way. Every one of us has the capacity for what is beautiful and what is deplorable. We are Adam and Eve in the garden, rejoicing in the new creation; we are Adam and Eve breaking promises and lying to God. We are Noah the rescuer, building an ark to save life; we are Noah the first planter of a vineyard who became drunk on the wine he made. We are Moses who murdered and fled; we are Moses who confronted Pharaoh and led an escape from slavery. We are David the wise king; we are David the lecher who used his power to steal another man's wife. We are Peter who proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah; we are Peter who panicked in the shadows and denied even knowing Jesus at all. We are who we are—frail creatures of dust, yet just a little less than angels. God doesn't force us to be something we're not. So instead God lovingly, patiently, guides and encourages us to become something more than what we are. God heals us, forgives us, loves us, and by God's unearned grace, we become more.

The second sermon, in its quiet way, emphasizes precisely this quality of God's love in some detail. The Pentecost crowd heard the disciples speaking to them in their own languages. They heard about this Jesus of Nazareth, crucified, raised from the dead, the Messiah for all ages. They were cut to their hearts—deeply moved—and so they asked Peter, "What then should we do?" He gave them a

listing of next steps: Repent—turn away from lying, harming others, false pride, debilitating fear—and turn toward God, toward compassion, service, trust. Save yourself from this corrupt generation—recognize that the pathway forward is not along the world’s highway, but along a different route opened up by Christ and down which you are blown by the Holy Spirit. Be baptized—step forward in a community of faith and be washed; share in a ritual of new birth and new beginnings as God’s own child. When Peter answered their question about what they should do, he wasn’t angry or judgmental. He didn’t chastise them or question their worthiness to receive God’s grace. Peter was straightforward and caring in his answer. Then he added these wonderful words: *This promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls.* Not “this requirement”, “this burden,” “this obligation.” No, this promise is for you. For the first time in history, religion wasn’t about trying to appease an angry God. Religion wasn’t about trying to placate and please a distant deity. Religion was about the Lord God who came to us—who initiates relationships—who takes the first step with outstretched hands offering something for us: a promise. A God, who in Christ through the Holy Spirit, is with us always: unconditionally, patient and persistent and permanent.

There’s nothing flashy about this part of the Pentecost story. There are no tongues of fire, no swirling winds, no miracles of tongues speaking in foreign languages. There’s just a quiet-yet-adamant promise about being called to be close to God right now and for always.

Does either of these sermons work for you? Does this homily on the Pentecost story challenge or inspire or convict you so that you will lead lives of faithful witness to Jesus Christ? Before you answer that, re-play the details you’ve just heard once more in your mind. The disciples were inspired by the Holy Spirit to leave their safe Upper Room and head out into a diverse world of listeners both receptive and skeptical—and shared with them the simple facts about Jesus of Nazareth, both Lord and Messiah. They spoke about an alternative way of living, in the world but not of the world. They gently framed this good news, not as a test you have to pass or a burden you have to carry, but as a loving promise offered to us, fully aware of our unworthiness. We’ve heard this story today in a place of sung praise and shared prayers. We’ve told this story today near a table whose bread we will share and as part of a fellowship that draws us out of ourselves into a community of faith. I don’t know if that means you have been inspired or convicted this Pentecost—but you are now part of the Pentecost story, because as scripture says, the next step after everything quieted down was this: *They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.* (Acts 2:42)

It’s not about making people believe or overwhelming folks into leading different lives. It’s not about being the best and cutest little perfect kingdom of Christ. It’s about being us—a community with wounds and scars, with joys and dreams, who know, oh God, we need you. We really need you. Help us, Lord, to listen for you

in the cacophony of life. Help us, Lord, to hear you speak in the words of our own language. Help us, Lord, to hold to your promise and follow where your Spirit blows us. So for now, thank you Lord that we can study your word, enjoy Christian fellowship, share the communion bread and these moments of common prayer. And if that is your sermon to us, O God, we'll trust you on this our Pentecost Day.

AMEN