

June 4, 2017 (Journey)

TEXT: Acts 2:1–21

TITLE: The Gift of Yinz pt. 2

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Eleven years ago to the day I preached my first Pentecost sermon here at ELPC: June 4, 2006. Time flies. Ian had just completed first grade; this year he's graduating from high school. And if my memory is correct, I believe it was the first time I said the word "yinz" in a sermon. I didn't try and load that early sermon with a lot of Pittsburghese. I didn't say 'redd up,' 'Stillers,' and "n'at"—but I did say a fair amount about the theology of Yinz as it relates to the Day of Pentecost.

When I picked out the scripture passage for today, I did a bit of creative editing in the reading from Acts 2. The whole chapter has 47 verses in it; you should go home and read it all for yourself. Our reading this morning was a sort of highlight reel of that first Pentecost. There's the opening material. The disciples were all gathered in one place. Why? Because it was the first big Jewish festival in Jerusalem being held after Passover—a time seven weeks earlier when Jesus had been arrested, tried by the Jewish elders, and crucified by the Roman authorities. I doubt that Pontius Pilate wanted another public disturbance during this later harvest festival, so I can well imagine that the disciples were all laying low. They had seen the risen Lord. They wanted to share the news of Jesus' resurrection with as many people as possible. But perhaps now wasn't the best moment to make a public scene.

Evidently God had other plans. We're told that everyone in the house in which the disciples were huddled first heard a sound like the rush of a violent wind. Then something appeared above them, which to their eyes seemed like divided tongues of fire. The noise and fire surrounded them and in that space they began to speak in different languages. At some point the disciples moved from the house out into the open courtyard—and their voices went from random speaking to intentional conversations with people from all other the place.

I didn't include the verses mentioning all the different linguistic groups they encountered; you've heard about them before—Parthians, Medes, Cretans, Romans, and Arabs. Today's reading simply jumps to the next big thing—when Peter stood up and addressed the Jerusalem crowd. Peter had become the leader of the disciple group, despite the fact that when Jesus was arrested, Peter denied even knowing Christ on three occasions. Peter was now the linchpin holding the frightened group of followers together. He chaired the committee meeting in which they elected a replacement for Judas Iscariot. And he was the one who stepped forward on Pentecost to explain what was going on. Was he the best public speaker in the group? Possibly not—he'd been a simple fisherman by trade until Jesus made him a fisher of people. But he certainly was brave and willing to take bold steps. And for that ragtag group of resurrection-

witnessing disciples, he was their leader and the best candidate to tell the world about how Jesus is Lord.

This is where the “yinz” stuff enters into the Pentecost story. But first, a football story. I played football in Junior High and I was terrible. I was an offensive lineman of sorts. Mostly I was on the sidelines, until that fateful day when we were beating lowly Drexel by a score of 36–6. There were only six seconds left on the clock and we needed to receive a kick-off. Our coach looked up and simply said, “Everyone from here down go out on the field, and Bush and Holbert, you play back.” I’d never received a punt in my life, so of course the ball came right to me. I didn’t catch it, but I did manage to pick it up before it stopped rolling. And I ran like the wind and might have scored a touchdown if I’d opened my eyes instead of shutting them and running toward the center of the field where the entire opposing team simply made a giant semi-circle and fell on me to end the game.

I tell that story because with an arbitrary sweep of the hand, our coach turned a ragtag cluster of kids minding their own business by the sidelines into an impromptu receiving team, including me. Whatever else we’d been thinking about just then, now we had a new purpose and shared identity. In the same way, the gust of wind that blew into the disciples’ upper room long ago turned that ragtag cluster of Jesus followers into an impromptu evangelism team. Whatever else they’d been thinking or worrying about, they now had a new spirit within them—new abilities to put to use—and a ready crowd of conversation partners just outside the house walls waiting to hear them talk about Jesus in words they could understand. They went from first person singular disciples to first person plural—from “you” and “you” and “you” to “Yinz.” Which is one way to think about what it means to be a church - yinz followers of Jesus Christ.

When Peter raised his voice and addressed the crowd on Pentecost, notice what he said—or more importantly, what he didn’t say. He said, *People of Jerusalem, Jesus of Nazareth was a man attested with deeds of power, wonders and signs. He was handed over with the foreknowledge of God, crucified and killed outside the law, but then God raised him up, revealing him as both Lord and Messiah.* He didn’t start by saying anything about himself—about why he is an important man and someone people should listen to; nor did he start by figuring out who was in his crowd—asking for a show of hands of those who shouted “Hosanna” on Palm Sunday vs. those who had shouted “Crucify him!” on Good Friday. He didn’t seem to care that there were Parthians, Medes and Elamites in the audience, visitors from Greece, Rome, Asia and Arabia, nor did it matter whether those different groups had been friendly or antagonistic toward the Jews over the centuries. None of that mattered. Peter had a one-size-fits-all message about this Jesus who lived, died and rose again as a sign of God’s salvation plan for all humanity. The different ethnicities and languages present on Pentecost may have been a source of division before, but right then the people were one group, one “yinz,” one congregation learning anew about Jesus the Christ.

So here's a tough Pentecost 2017 question for all of us. 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 didn't God make everyone in that crowd immediately become a follower of Jesus? As soon as we ask that question, we realize there are flaws in our logic. First off, scripture tells us that those dozen, Spirit-filled disciples made about 3000 converts that day, yet here we are complaining that the total wasn't 3001. That seems a bit ungrateful.

Second, we asked this question: *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 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 a little less than angels. God doesn't force us to be something we're not. Instead God lovingly 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.

So now 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're now part of the “yinz” 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) They became a Presbyterian church. And that's not an individual thing but a “yinz” thing.

Soon another Pentecost Day will be history. But even as it passes by, it affects us—all of us. The Spirit does blow. The crowd to which we share the gospel is still full of divisions—divisions of race, class, language, orientation, politics, and geography. But the story we have to tell is simple and life-changing. You and I

are the Pentecost people for today. The Spirit is sending us out there. We are having an impact on others.

So eat something first—pray together as a group first – but know this: God is at work to do far greater than we can hope or imagine and God, by the power of the Holy Spirit through the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, is doing this work through yinz, through each of us. That's the unsettling, inspiring, empowering news of Pentecost.

AMEN