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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
June 12, 2011 (Pentecost)
John 20:19-23, Acts 2:1-21
“Outpourings of the Spirit”

I had lunch earlier this week with a Presbyterian colleague who pastors a large church that, shall we say, occupies a different location on the theological spectrum than we do. We'd never really met before, but I wanted to hear about his ministry, the things that he felt were going right at his church, and the challenges his congregation was facing in these troubled times. It was a good conversation, one that I hope was mutually enlightening. But at one point, this pastor mentioned that a long-time member of his church had cornered him and asked him point blank “Is Gandhi in heaven?”; and then the pastor asked me how I'd answer that question. I paused for a moment to weigh my options. If I said, “Yes, Gandhi is in heaven” even though Gandhi was not a baptized Christian, it would appear I believed Christianity was not the sole way for personal salvation. And if I said, “No, Gandhi is not in heaven,” I was asserting that literally billions of people will be barred from eternal life because of where they happened to be born and what religion they happened to be exposed to while growing up. In the end, I said, “I believe Gandhi is in heaven because I can't imagine the Jesus I've come to know through scripture barring someone like Gandhi from eternal life.”

I don't think my colleague thought that was the right answer – which prompted me to wonder how Jesus can be defined so that it would make sense to exclude Gandhi from heaven. It also led me to look at Pentecost with fresh eyes – this outpouring of the Holy Spirit that sent men and women disciples into the streets to tell the good news of Jesus Christ. It is true that the Pentecost story in the book of Acts is a classic; we see it as a guide for Christian evangelism. It suggests that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are sent out to different lands and different people to tell them about Jesus Christ that they might be baptized in his name. But I think the Pentecost story tells us much more than that, and tells it in such a way that I don't believe Gandhi or people of other faiths are automatically on the outside of heaven's gates looking in.

First, it is important to remember that Pentecost is part of the Easter story. I know, the church calendar separates Easter from Pentecost by seven weeks, but they are both part of the same core story of God's grace and love breaking into this hurting world, God in Christ manifesting a power that is stronger than death, and that conquers all fear and division among people. Early in the beginning of the gospel story, John the Baptist prophesied that he was baptizing people with water, but one was coming who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16). Then you heard in today's gospel lesson how on Easter evening, the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples, breathed the Holy Spirit upon them, and said, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). Our model for going into the world is Christ. We are to show his radical love and hospitality, the type that crosses barriers and goes out to strangers and outcasts and diverse people of all types. This was confirmed on Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit and tongues of fire fully came to the disciples. The Old Testament prophecy

came true – God’s power descended on all flesh. The full Easter event – resurrection, new life, proclamation for all the world – had finally come to pass.

Seeing Pentecost as part of the Easter story helps keep our focus on God and not let us get distracted into believing Pentecost was simply the launch date for a Christian marketing campaign, when the church had a fiery kick-off event to begin selling our product in a world of competing religious merchandise.

Second, Pentecost contains that description of people speaking in different languages – something a bit chaotic and unsettling, as was modeled today in our worship service. So who were all these people anyway? Imagine trying to tell someone about all the different people that belong to ELPC. You might say: People come to our church from all over – from Murrysville to Mount Lebanon, from Irwin to Imperial (which would be a true statement). In trying to describe the crowd gathered in Jerusalem, the writer of Acts organized them in groups that moved geographically from east to west. There were people from the old Persian empire area – Parthians, Medes, Elamites and Mesopotamians. There were people from the Judean area around Jerusalem, from the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea – Cappadocia, Pontus; people from the Greek territories of Phrygia and Pamphylia, from Rome in the north, and from north Africa and Libya along the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

This array of people came from where the sun rose to where the sun set. And they spoke an equally wide array of languages: Persian, Syriac, Greek, Coptic, Latin, Aramean, and other dialects. But remember that the miracle of Pentecost was not that everyone spoke the same language. It was not that the diversity and differences between people were removed so that they could become a uniform mass of humanity. No, the miracle of Pentecost built on the commission of Christ: As the Father has sent me, so I send you. The disciples who had been afraid to speak, afraid to step out into the world, now found their voices again – and miraculously they could communicate with others different from them: strangers, aliens, foreigners. They could talk with one another – not like a telemarketer selling a product, but like a friend, a traveling companion who shares his or her own story while listening to what others say in response.

The Easter-Pentecost event is centrifugal in nature. From the Easter dawn of new resurrection life, the women ran from the tomb to tell others; and the Emmaus disciples ran from their home to tell how death had been conquered at last. Suddenly the wind picked up – the same Spirit that moved over the face of the waters at the beginning of time now moved again, stirring up hearts and souls. Inspired and touched by fire, the Easter people kept moving out into the world – out from their rooms with locked doors, out from places of homogeneity and isolation, out into the world. They moved with the Easter story, with the example of Jesus on their lips and in their actions – forgiving, welcoming, healing, bringing reconciliation in the world. And where did they go? They went to others – people from Parthia, Greece, Mesopotamia, and North Africa. They talked to them, using their words, their images, their cultural symbols. And here’s the critical part: they assuredly listened as well as they shared their stories, beliefs, pains

and dreams. There remained a distinctiveness active in this process: Parthians remained Parthian, Cappadocians remained Cappadocians; Africans, Greeks and Romans were not suddenly turned into Hebrew-speaking Judeans. But in this message of Christ, they found a new commonality – a new forgiveness, a new vision, a new spirit, a new hope that united them despite their differences.

“Is Gandhi in heaven?” is the wrong question. It’s not about who’s in and who’s out. The real questions about faith always begin with something more basic: What brings life in places where death is still feared? What animates spirits in bodies that are now beaten down, afraid and withdrawn? What can cause compassion and a thirst for justice to burn within us as if we’d been touched by fire? I personally don’t believe that every religious path equally answers those questions. There are philosophical and theological flaws in Islam and Hinduism and Buddhism, just as there are inconsistencies and liabilities in how Christianity is both taught and lived out.

But that is precisely why we have Pentecost. We don’t define God even though we write lots of textbooks about God; we don’t set the boundaries for the movement of the Holy Spirit. We are men and women sent out to learn from those of different denominations and different faith traditions; sent out to speak one another’s language, to listen to their stories even as we are honest about our own. We are called to go out in the example of Jesus just as others are sent out in the example of Buddha, Mohammed, Moses, and Krishna. Yes, we each affirm the distinctiveness of the Christian message through our study of scripture, by being baptized, and by belonging to a church; but that should not blind us to a larger spiritual reality that transcends what we know and understand in our immediate context. To affirm from our own scriptures how God is the Creator and Sustainer of all the world, and how Jesus himself spoke about having sheep of other folds to whom he was also sent, means that God’s Spirit is causing Pentecost miracles all over the world in places and among people we are too quick to consider foreigners, strangers and non-invitees on heaven’s guest list.

I’m anxious to be pleasantly surprised by who is in heaven. I’m quite happy not to be in charge of the keys to any heavenly gates. That’s not part of the Jesus I know from scripture or the Easter good news that was blown about with such gusto and power that first Pentecost. Today we receive our confirmation class – an excellent group of young men and women, some of whom were baptized as infants, some who will be baptized today, all who will become part of this congregation. Soon they will be sent out into the world – finishing their high school studies, off to college, to relationships, to vocations, to adventures and challenges in a world far bigger than they can even imagine. For now, let’s join them on this Pentecost day. Let’s look toward the horizon with them, sharing our story, sharing about Easter and resurrection, repentance, compassion and justice, even as we listen to them and others tell us about their faith, their times of repentance, compassion and justice. The wind is picking up! As Jesus was sent, so we are sent. That’s what today is about. Thanks be to God.

AMEN