

June 8, 2014 (Pentecost Sunday)

TEXT: Acts 2:1-6, 14-21

TITLE: Universal Coverage

On Friday, I will be heading to Detroit, Michigan, to spend one week at our denomination's General Assembly. For those of you new to our church, this is an every other year, national gathering of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Lenore Williams from our congregation will be attending as a commissioner, while I will be there more as an observer and in my role as co-moderator for the Covenant Network. Believe me, this is not a cushy junket. It is a week of meetings, convention hall food and those little shampoo bottles in hotel bathrooms. There are inspirational moments – stories of Presbyterian overseas mission co-workers and meeting ecumenical partners from around the world. But there will also be the inevitable handwringing over our denomination's continued membership decline and the departure of some larger, conservative churches to sister denominations and breakaway fellowship groups. All in all, General Assembly could use a good dose of Pentecost spirit, so I ask your prayers for that for our church in the coming week.

We at ELPC are fortunate to be a congregation that is healthy and active and which receives about 40 new members every year, including this year's stellar class of nine confirmation students. But it is true that Christian denominations in general are declining in membership, with everyone from Catholics to Methodists to Presbyterians to Baptists and evangelicals concerned about how to get people into their pews on Sundays. Thom Rainer is a Christian blogger who writes about church trends. In recent posts, he argued that the single most common factor of declining churches is that they are dominated by an inward focus. Declining churches prioritize time, money and ministry upon serving only their own members. Budgets are predominantly for programs aimed at those already in their pews. Times of worship and worship styles are shaped by those already attending worship. Yes, congregations should care for members, teach their children and visit their shut-ins. But congregations decline when little effort or attention is given to outreach – to ministering to those in the community – to connecting creatively with those outside the church walls.

I believe we do a pretty good job in our church outreach. We welcome many groups into our space every month. We draw in the community through our Vacation Church School (which just closed registration with 92 kids signed up this year), through our Food for Thought mentoring program, our Club 116 Wednesday youth program, and our Hope Academy for Music and the Arts outreach to scores of community kids. We also send volunteers to help renovate homes and counsel families through Open Hand Ministries or to volunteer for mission trips across America. But in the end, ministry to the community needs to be something we all take to heart.

In the Pentecost story, we are told how the disciples were touched by the wind and the fire of the Holy Spirit, which gave them the capacity to communicate in the languages of lots of people. Notice that in vs. 5, it says explicitly “now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.” Pentecost was not about a gift of the Holy Spirit that helped the disciples share the news of Christ with visitors from distant lands. They talked with people who were living in Jerusalem but who were outside the walls of their “congregation.” Think about what that same Pentecost evangelism would look like for us at ELPC? It means we would be led by the Spirit to communicate the gospel so that 9th grade confirmation kids can understand it, native Spanish and Korean speakers can understand it, single parent households and retired people, welfare recipients and country club crowds can all understand it. See, God intends the message of Christ to be universally applied, universally shared, which is why faith is like an insurance policy with universal coverage and we are the ones to share this faith with everyone.

Let me be more precise. As we approach our church’s 200th anniversary in 2019, all of us need to be prayerful about what God is calling our church to be and do in this changing East Liberty community. 1) If you are fairly fluent in Spanish and can help with our Latina outreach, write your name on a scrap of paper and give it to Heather or me today. 2) Young adults often have deep faith but are hesitant to join a congregation or sign up for a committee. Think about how we can adjust our definition of “church” so as to be more supportive of their faith lives. 3) We are struggling with ministering to the homeless on our streets, especially now that the shelter has moved to Community House. Part of that struggle has meant that we are suspending our 8:00 am Good Samaritan worship service at least for the summer. If you have a heart for this ministry, pray about this and take some steps to find ways you can reach out to our most vulnerable neighbors – and then share those steps with us so this church can join with you. We’re not going to do it for you, but we will join with you. That’s what Pentecost is about.

There’s a second surprising aspect to the Pentecost narrative, which I’ll set up with an old story. The French essayist Michel de Montaigne tells about how in the 12th century a king and his army completely surrounded a rival Duke’s walled city. There was no hope for the besieged citizens. So they sent out ambassadors to negotiate with the attacking king, asking him to show mercy and allow the women and girls safe passage out of the city. He agreed and said the noblewomen were free to leave the city unharmed but they were only allowed to take with them what they could carry on their backs. After a while, the walled city gates swung open. To the king’s surprise, out came the women of the city carrying their sons and husbands on their backs – including the Duchess struggling beneath the weight of her husband, the rival Duke. When the king saw their wisdom and loyalty, he had to laugh for joy and forgave them all and withdrew his entire army.

The king thought the women would rescue their jewels and possessions, but instead was unexpectedly surprised when they saved their husbands. (There's a whole sermon in that detail.) On Pentecost, Peter offers up a surprise of his own when he addressed the crowd gathered around him in a Jerusalem square. He began his inaugural sermon by quoting the Hebrew prophet Joel. Typically Old Testament words of faith came through only a few persons – prophets, judges, or Jewish leaders in the temple. But Peter emphasized that now, in these amazing days since the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, words of faith were going to be proclaimed by lots of surprising people: not just prophets, but young people, sons and daughters; young folks and old folks, and those who lived on society's margins, slaves and servants, the powerless now empowered by God's Holy Spirit. They would dream dreams and prophesy. They would speak truth to power. They would challenge injustice and sin. They would point to the Lord Christ, who was and who is and who is to come.

On this day we welcome the confirmation class as members of this church. In a few moments we will read their faith statements as our statement of faith. This is not a nicety done so that they feel included in worship. This is part of how they teach us by their faith on this modern day Pentecost. Our sons and daughters aren't made members of this church to boost our rolls; they are made members of our church as a witness to how God is still working for universal coverage and is calling us to use everyone's gifts as Pentecost people. Some of ELPC's ministry involves this building and our church staff. But much of it, most of it, is something you each carry on your backs when you walk out these doors. Back in the 12th century, in a time of war, the load was a heavy one of sons and husbands, carried out in a time of crisis. We are not so burdened today. We are free to love God and love one another fully, completely. Upon us a wind blows, a flame touches our hearts – our eyes are opened and all around us we see young people, old people, everyone as vessels of God's grace and recipients of Christ's redemption.

Look at the church and this community through the eyes of Peter and the prophet Joel – and rejoice! If we define our ministry by Pentecost standards, we need never fret over decline nor fuss over scarcity. The doors to the community and to the church universal are open wide. Our God provides for us abundantly – Jesus Christ is Lord of all – and the Holy Spirit still moves in our midst and never tires or never accepts defeat. Never.

AMEN