

September 9, 2018

TEXT: Acts 2:1–12

TITLE: A Bigger Table

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Let's be clear: Today is not Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost is celebrated approximately 50 days after Easter, which this year was on May 20th. But we are so used to hearing certain bible stories on certain days that we stop expecting to hear anything new from them. If I preached about Easter in January or re-told the Christmas story some Sunday in July, you might think about those wonderful events in a fresh way.

So what happens if we hear about Pentecost on September 9th? Well, a typical Pentecost sermon always stresses these points: 1) The disciples were still grieving the death of Jesus and laying low in Jerusalem when they were touched by fire and blown out into the crowded city streets. 2) Once there, they miraculously began to speak in the languages of the foreigners gathered in the city for the Pentecost harvest festival. 3) This wonder fulfilled a promise made by the resurrected Christ that the Holy Spirit would come down from on high, and the Christian church was born that day—with over 3000 people accepting the good news of Jesus Christ. Every Pentecost Sunday for 30 years now I've re-told that story roughly in that way. Today let's walk a different path—or, in light of the video I showed earlier, let's dance a different path this not-Pentecost Sunday.

Matt Harding, the young man featured in the earlier video, grew up in Connecticut and stumbled into a career as a videogame designer. But he wasn't happy. He felt stuck in a routine. When two colleagues announced they were moving to Australia and going to work remotely from there, Matt begged them to take him along. Life in Brisbane, Australia was good, but Matt still wasn't happy. Seeing so many Australians take off to explore the world, Matt decided to give that a try. While traveling in Vietnam, a friend said, "Hey, stand over there and do that silly dance you always do." Out of that random moment came an early viral video that has now been seen by literally millions of people.

It is fun to see this guy do a goofy dance in exotic places around the world—in India, Ireland and Zanzibar. But the real power of the video comes when Matt gets people to dance with him—when people from all over the world come together to dance with him. Suddenly Matt's story goes from being about one individual to being about the entire world.

Now back to Pentecost. Every time we tell the bible story found in Acts 2, someone has to read off the string of 15 nations in verses 9-11. Almost all of the places are totally foreign to us here in America and most of them are hard to pronounce. But the list is far from random. Remember that Jesus Christ lived during the time of the Roman Empire, when the emperor's power stretched all around the Mediterranean Sea including to the land of Judea. The old saying was quite true: All roads lead to Rome.

But the author of Acts wanted to tell a different story about a different power—God’s power revealed in Christ, not Caesar’s power on a throne in Rome. So he described a huge crowd of pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem for the Pentecost feast. He identified the lands from which they came, moving from east to west in large sweeping gestures. Beyond the eastern edge of the Roman Empire were the Parthians, Medes and Elamites, coming closer to home were Judea, Mesopotamia and Cappadocia. Northwest in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) were Pontus, Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia—southwest along the northern shore of Africa were Egypt, Libya and Cyrene. Far to the west was Rome—and in-between was Crete, plus Arabs coming from the south. This description of the world was not defined by Rome, but by Jerusalem. This world was not shaped by Roman power but by God’s power—God’s Spirit blowing these pilgrims to that city square in Jerusalem on that day so they might hear from the apostles the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection and then return back home. It was an act that literally changed the world—that re-defined the world, no longer shaped by a regional power but by a global God.

Think of it this way: The human tendency is always to be self-focused: “All roads lead to me.” This view currently expresses itself in a nationalism that wants to make America great, because “all roads lead to America.” Frankly, none of this is a new idea. Both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson warned against entangling alliances with other nations. The Monroe doctrine decreed that foreign powers were to keep away from the two American continents. The tension between caring for America First or being a global partner with other nations came to a head in World War II. Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave a State of the Union address in which he outlined the “Four Freedoms”: freedom of speech, freedom to worship God in one’s own way, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Norman Rockwell later painted a famous series of pictures illustrating these freedoms—showing a man speaking at a town hall meeting, a group of people praying, a family celebrating a Thanksgiving meal, and two parents tucking in their children and making sure they’re safe even as they hold in their hands a newspaper describing bombing attacks in Europe.

The common way to think about these four freedoms is to believe that America has to be diligent to protect these freedoms for ourselves and for our children. But Roosevelt had a different vision. He outlined the four freedoms in his address as a way to move the United States away from its isolationism and position of neutrality so that we would finally take a more active role in fighting Hitler. FDR’s exact wording is that we must be willing to fight to preserve the freedom of speech *everywhere in the world*, freedom to worship God in one’s own way *everywhere in the world*, freedom to live free of want *everywhere in the world*, and freedom from fear *anywhere in the world*. It’s not about us—it’s about all of us. It’s not about our little world but how we play our part in God’s world.

That is the idea behind the power of the Pentecost story, of that crazy list of nations represented in the crowd gathered in Jerusalem long ago. By every standard, it was an unsettling event. Disciples huddled in an upper room are touched as if by fire—blown out the doors into the streets, not fearful but energized like dancers—filled with a spirit

that connected them with others, allowed them to talk with strangers, to literally speak their language. It wasn't about getting them to hear about Jesus on our terms. It was about telling the Christ story on their terms, in their words, so that they would take the gospel back home and thus change the world.

I recently read a book that helped me visualize what this looks like for us here in the church. The book is called A Bigger Table and it's by John Pavlovitz. The title is the metaphor for what Pentecost is about and what we should be about—namely, a bigger table. Pavlovitz writes this: “The place where God is will always be radically inclusive. It will always outgrow the container, always break beyond the borders we create or imagine or intend. The bigger table will always be leading us beyond where we believe the edge of our compassion and connection should be, and often this will be outside the rigid faith of our childhood” (A Bigger Table, p. 155). There's a pair of contrasting images: rigid faith vs. a bigger table.

People often say, “I just want to try and live like Jesus did.” Well, consider this: Jesus spent almost his entire life teaching and ministering to non-Christians. The world was only beginning to learn about the gospel he was sharing, the fresh wind of the spirit that blew wherever he went. That's why our primary work as Christians can never be just within these walls. Our lives of faith were never intended to be echo chambers of like-minded souls. The focus can't be about us Christians vs. all those other people. The focus must be about open doors, radical hospitality, offering a chair so strangers can sit at bigger tables.

We include Spanish in our worship services, not just because there are a few people for whom Spanish is their primary language. We include it as a reminder that Jesus didn't speak English and the gospel of Christ must always be shared in multiple languages. We know that the gospel always needs to be translated from Presbyterian to whatever faith language is spoken by Parthians, Phrygians and Pamphylans—that we want to welcome Pittsburghers as well as those from Panama, Paraguay and Pakistan. Our communion table and baptism font must be designed and intended to welcome all families, all children. Will this be uncomfortable for us? Sure. Will we not always say the right things or do the right things. Of course.

But that's what Pentecost was about. Opening doors—upsetting traditions—communicating cross-culturally, across lines of race, gender, religion, nationality—setting up a bigger table. Like FDR said: Let us protect the freedom to worship God everywhere in the world. Like Christ said: As I've been sent, so I send you even to the ends of the earth. Just as the crowds on Pentecost long ago asked “What does this mean?,” our task is not to tell them by defining things by our terms, but to follow the Spirit and say in reply “Let's discover the answer together. Here, have a seat at this table. With Christ, there's always room for one more.”

AMEN.