

“The Spirit Removes Barriers”

Based on Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost 2018

Rev. Dr. Kevin Orr

This is the day of Pentecost. It's the day when we remember when the Spirit was poured out on the disciples of Jesus and the witness of the church began. Many consider Pentecost to mark the birth of the church. I have even heard of some churches who throw a birthday party for the church, complete with birthday cake. But Pentecost is not just a Christian holiday that marks the official end of the Easter season. This is also a festival kept by those who practice the Jewish faith, marking fifty days after the feast of Passover. It is called Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks. In the days of Jesus, this feast was a celebration of the first harvest of grain, which would be the wheat harvest. So this was a day to give thanks to God but also a reason to party. This day was also a remembrance of when Moses received the Ten Commandments, which took place fifty days after the Israelites fled from Egypt.

Let's take a minute and revisit how the giving of the Ten Commandments took place. The people had journeyed through the wilderness, making their way to the holy mountain, Mt. Sinai. As they approached, on the top of the mountain there was fire and smoke, lightning, the earth was shaking, it was if Mt. Sinai was an active volcano, like we have been watching in Hawaii the past few weeks. As you might imagine, nobody wanted to go up the mountain to meet with God. It was frightening! So Moses went up the mountain by himself.

All that fire and smoke that signaled the presence of God was yet another of the many demonstrations of God's deeds of power. We remember all the ways God demonstrated power through the process of getting Israel out of Egypt, with the sending of the various plagues and the parting of the Red Sea. God's presence at the summit of Mt. Sinai with the fire and smoke was yet one more example. And as Moses was with God on the top of the mountain, God gave Moses the two tablets upon which was etched the Ten Commandments. The gift of these commandments helped to firm up a covenant between God and the

children of Abraham. God had chosen them to be God's people and had delivered them from slavery. How might they give their devotion and service to the God who had claimed them and saved them? The Commandments were given so the people would know what their God expects of them. The covenantal relationship between God and Israel was forged.

Now we skip ahead a few thousand years, on the day of Pentecost, the first religious festival after the death of Jesus, although there were rumors that Jesus had come back to life. Jews from all across the world were in Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot. And then, all of a sudden, God showed up in a powerful way. It wasn't quite like a volcano eruption, but it was noisy, there was a mighty wind, and there were flames of fire. Before, God's presence was way up on the top of the mountain and Moses alone had to hike up to the top. But this time the presence of God came down right into the midst of the apostles and all who were gathered with them in that house. The Spirit didn't come down on one person, say, Peter. No, the Spirit descended upon all who were gathered inside.

The noise, the wind, the fire, all of this must have gotten the attention of all those people in the area. They must have been perplexed about what was happening at that house, where there was wind and flame but the house wasn't burning down. What is going on over there? And as people drew near, all those inside the house came bursting outside speaking of the mighty deeds of God in the native languages of all those Jews gathered around them. One hundred and twenty people streaming out into the streets declaring with boldness the mighty deeds of God. It was noisy! The streets of Jerusalem were already filled with noise and commotion, with all those people from out of town, all those people gathered for the religious ceremony and for the parties. It took a big splash to get the attention of the city. And so God acted in a way that captured the attention of everyone and filled the people with amazement and wonder as they saw Galileans speaking perfect Latin, Greek, Arabic, or whatever native language was yours. Absolutely bewildering.

Peter then quiets the crowd gathered around them and, while still filled with the Spirit, Peter proclaims his first sermon. Using as his text

the prophet Joel, Peter proclaims that the Spirit of God is descending on all people, men and women, boys and girls, from all walks and stations in life. All people means all, not some, not many, all. And Peter goes on to say that all who call on the name of the Lord, not some, not many, all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved. And on that day we are told that 3,000 were baptized and added to the number of believers.

What an awesome act of power God displayed on that day of Pentecost in Jerusalem a few thousand years ago. It was an act of power that drove the disciples out of that building and on to the streets. It was a force that could not be contained within four walls. They had to go out as they spoke of the mighty deeds of God. They went to where the people were. But they didn't speak in Hebrew, or even in Aramaic unless that was your native language. No, they spoke in whatever language was needed so that the person they spoke to understood what they were saying. No translating was required. Any communication barrier was broken down by an act of God. In fact, everything that happened on that Pentecost day was the breaking down of barriers: the barrier of where God would be present, not on a faraway mountain top but right in the middle of the room where all the disciples were gathered. The barrier of walls and doors were broken down as the disciples rushed out into the streets. The barrier of not knowing the language of others was removed so that people could understand each other. The proclamation was made that the Spirit comes down not on one or two, or some, or even many, but upon everyone. The proclamation was made that all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved, Jew and Gentile. Yes, what happened that Pentecost in the city of Jerusalem was God's action of removing all barriers, so that all can experience the power of God with joy and wonder.

The outpouring of the Spirit continues to this day. Have you felt it? Have you ever sensed the presence of God in your midst? Sure, we don't experience the presence of God in a mighty wind and flames of fire. It's rarely that dramatic. But we experience that lump in the throat, a racing heart, the tightness of the stomach, the goosebumps, the catching of the breath, the shedding of a tear, when we find ourselves in the presence of holiness, of purity, of love. That is the Spirit of God manifesting herself

to us. And sometimes that same Spirit fills us up, lifts us up, and gives us the power and courage to act in ways that manifest love in the world. Sometimes the Spirit prompts us to speak to others with the language that everyone understands, the language of love. Sometimes the Spirit prompts us to tell our God story, how we have experienced God in our lives, to give a witness.

And sometimes the Spirit of God prompts us to do a particular kind of ministry, a specific way to express God's love in the world. I want to invite those who have shared with me that God has placed a ministry on their heart, to come forward. And if you never got around to telling me, but you sense that God is calling you to do something, come forward so that we can pray for you, asking God's blessing on you as you respond to the leading of God's Spirit. You may have an idea of what that something is. But maybe it isn't that clear. You know that there is something God wants you to do, but you can't quite put it into words. Or maybe right now you just feel that nudge to come forward, please come so we can pray for you. All of you who come down, I invite you to share with us in just a sentence or two what you are being called to do. I will go first...