

## “Tell Your Story”

Based on Acts 2:1-21

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This morning’s scripture reading is, of course, the story of what happened the first Pentecost after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. Pentecost marks the 50<sup>th</sup> day after Passover, a festival called Shavuot, which celebrated the wheat harvest and also the time when Moses received the Ten Commandments. Jews from all across the world would go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem for this festival. This sets the table nicely for the gospel to be proclaimed to all the nations of the world from the beginning, when you have Jews that represent every nation present in Jerusalem for the festival.

The first thing that stuck out for me as I reflected on this passage is that the disciples were all together in one place. The disciples were not scattered about in their own homes. And by disciples we aren’t just talking about the twelve disciples. There were 120 disciples gathered in this house. Before Jesus ascended to heaven he told the disciples to go to Jerusalem and to wait for the Holy Spirit to come down upon them, so that they would have power from on high. And so, here they were, talking, praying and waiting for the coming of the promised Holy Spirit.

Now just because they were all together in one place doesn’t mean that they were all of one mind. We shouldn’t be surprised if there were some personality conflicts. After all, with 120 people in one place there was bound to be some people that didn’t really like each other. Some people probably got on other people’s nerves. We know in the gospels that the disciples didn’t always get along. Aside from that, everyone is just kind of waiting around to see what the next faithful step will be for them. They are waiting for the Spirit. But when the Spirit does come, what then? Maybe there was some strategizing already taking place about what the next move would be once the Spirit arrived to give them the power they needed. Or maybe some cautioned that they shouldn’t be making any decisions until the Spirit arrived. Then maybe the Spirit would reveal to all of them what they should do. The bottom line, you

had in this house 120 people who were waiting around, not sure what the next move would be, and maybe not all on the same page.

As I thought about what it must have been in that house, it reminded me a little of Annual Conference. Clergy and lay people from all across West Ohio are gathered together in one place. It's not a house, it's Hoover Auditorium. And there are over 2000 of us. And we are certainly not all of one mind. Not everyone there gets along. There is talk about where we are as a church and what the next faithful step ought to be. There is some tension. A little uncertainty. A longing for the Holy Spirit to come down and fill us, empower us and guide us. We aren't all on the same page. But at least we are all together in one place, and that's something.

And of course we are all here together this morning and that's a good thing. We aren't all of the same mind on everything. I wouldn't say we have the same level of anxiety and tension that I felt at Annual Conference this week. But we are waiting for the Spirit to lead us into the next step as a congregation, as I prepare to leave you and the next pastor comes in to travel with you the next leg of this journey of St. Luke's. It's good that we are here together as we wait on the Spirit to guide us forward.

The second thing that struck me is how the Holy Spirit fell on every person present. The Spirit didn't just come down on Peter and the other eleven disciples. No, the Spirit came down on everyone gathered together in the house. It was an inclusive outpouring of the Spirit. No one was left out. Each person had what appeared to be a flame of fire appear over their heads. Each person was moved to proclaim the mighty works of God. Each person participated in the move of the Spirit in their midst. No one sat by or got passed over.

Now we carry on this understanding that no one gets passed over because we believe that when a person is baptized they receive the Holy Spirit as a part of that sacramental act. After I baptize someone I pray that the Holy Spirit come upon the person to empower them to become a faithful disciple. With holy oil I mark that person with the sign of the cross on their foreheads as an act of sealing them with the Holy Spirit. For us as United Methodists, people who are baptized don't wait until

some later time when the Spirit falls on them. Some churches do believe that later in a believer's life they receive Spirit baptism which is accompanied by signs, often speaking in tongues. But for us and many other churches the Spirit fills us at the moment of our baptism. It is part of one sacramental act. Whether you are baptized as a baby or well along in life, when the baptism happens you receive the Holy Spirit. No one is passed over. And the Spirit doesn't come and go. The Spirit abides within us. We are temples of the Holy Spirit. We have received what we need to be empowered to live the life of discipleship we have been baptized in to. All there is for us to do is to be open to the leading and empowerment of the Spirit, to tap into the Spirit rather than block it off.

Here's the third thing that struck me about this story from Acts: when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit they rushed out of the house and into the streets to proclaim the mighty acts of God. They didn't just stay inside and bask in the presence of the Spirit. No, they were compelled to get out of the house so that they could tell others how awesome God is and what are the awesome things God has done. It seems that no one stayed behind in the house. Everyone went out together into the streets so that those outside the four walls of the house could find out what God is doing.

Have you ever experienced something in which every part of your being cried out for you to tell somebody? Maybe you learned you were pregnant. Or you got the promotion you have been waiting for. Or some other great thing just happened in your life. Maybe you rushed to post your good news on Facebook. Or you called a friend. Or you find a way to steer the conversation toward your good news. However you do it, the news is so hot, so exciting, you just have to get it out. You have to tell someone your good news. This seems to be what it was like for those disciples when the Spirit promised by Jesus came down upon them. They had to get out there and tell others, even complete strangers, their good news.

From time to time we have had good news to tell. But when was the last time you felt compelled to proclaim the mighty acts of God? When was the last time you had an experience with God that was so

powerful, so exciting and uplifting, that you just had to share that experience with others? I would hope that for all of us this would be a regular occurrence. But I can honestly tell you that it has been awhile since I have felt compelled to share my experience of God with others. It's not that I have something against it. If someone was to ask me I would surely tell them about how I have experienced God in my life. But it's not something I lead with. It's not something I am so excited about that I am compelled to steer conversations toward talking about how I have experienced God in my life. Hopefully I am the only one here for whom this is the case. But I wouldn't be surprised if I am the only one. I think it's pretty common that, over time, our relationship with God becomes so much a part of our life that it loses its wonder and excitement. God becomes so familiar. Our experience of God is as common as breathing. It doesn't have the same excitement as when we first experienced God in a deep way. Our experience of God has become so common and normal that it doesn't feel like we have much of anything to share. I'm not saying this is good or bad. It's just the way it is. In any relationship, after a while, the excitement levels off. We are simply doing life together, in our human relationships as well as our relationship with God. And let's be honest, our lives often are not very exciting.

Still, every now and then, something might happen. We might experience God in a different way, in a way that genuinely moves us. And we feel compelled to testify. It's just that this doesn't happen on a daily basis for most of us. Maybe that is something we all could work on, to try to be more aware day by day where God is working in our lives. Maybe we can work on being more attentive, to be more aware of our experience of God in our daily lives. If we did, maybe we would feel like we have more to share. But that takes intentionality. And we all go through dry periods where we don't sense God's presence. It is those times that our faith is tested. We know God is with us but we don't always sense it. So we have to trust that God is still with us and have hope that the spiritual dry spell will give way to a more vital spirituality some time in the future. And when that happens it is much easier for us to tell our story to others.

The disciples, of course, experienced God in an extremely powerful way. They were compelled by the awesomeness of the experience to go out into the streets to tell their experience. But the miracle in this story is how every person could understand what the disciples were saying in their own native language. Any communication barrier was removed. The people in the street didn't have to translate the Aramaic they heard from the Galileans. They heard of the mighty works of God in the language they understood best. This really is amazing. We aren't told exactly how this worked. Did the disciple know what language to use when they were talking to someone? Or were they all speaking in Aramaic and the Spirit interceded by filtering the language through some kind of divine translator so that the other person heard it in their own language? However it worked, the miracle is that barriers to understanding what the disciples were saying was removed. The crowds may not have understood what the disciples were saying meant. But they didn't have to translate their words. What they said could be understood even if what they were hearing needed further explanation, which is what Peter does when he gives his first sermon.

Like I said, we all find it challenging often to witness to our experiences of God with others. We don't feel compelled to talk about our experiences. There is no burning need to express ourselves about our experiences. Maybe when we first came to believe in Jesus, but unless something extraordinary has happened recently we just don't feel like we have anything interesting to say. But maybe even more challenging is to share our witness in ways people can understand.

The longer you have been in the church the more you become accustomed to "Christianeze." We talk about salvation, grace, and maybe even throw around words like justification and sanctification. Any word that has five syllables may not be a familiar word to everyone. We just pick up church language. And people who don't know anything about Jesus or think anything about salvation may not know what we are talking about. Or maybe they have picked up little bits of information here and there and don't share the same understanding about what salvation means, or grace, or sin, or any other God language we use. The challenge is: how do we share our experiences of God without using

religious jargon? How do we tell others about salvation without using the word saved or salvation?

This past week at Annual Conference the theme was, “Be Not Afraid...Hope.” To accentuate this theme, we had people who gave brief witnesses to how they experienced hope in their lives. A few of those witnesses were particularly powerful. I remember this one man who had lived a life of addiction to drugs that had taken him to a low place in his life. But through a friend he got connected to a pastor who invested in him. He came into the church and over time decided to be baptized. He said that when he came out of the water it felt like all the dirt, the slime, and the filth that had clung to him because of the stuff he had done was washed off and sunk to the bottom of the water. He didn’t talk about being saved but he did talk about feeling like he had been given a fresh start. And I remember this woman whose addiction to alcohol had left her homeless and penniless on the streets of Detroit. She had burned a lot of bridges. And in one last desperate attempt, she reached out on Facebook posting about the situation she was in, asking if anyone could help her, and that she was scared. Well, one of her friends read that post and contacted their pastor. That night, they drove from Toledo to Detroit to pick her up. As they drove back to Toledo she kept saying over and over how grateful she was, and the pastor and her friend kept saying over and over, “This is what we do.” She was welcomed into the church community without judgment. She was loved on, even when she didn’t act very loving. They didn’t give up on her. As she told us her story she emphasized over and over how she was loved and included, that she had a new family. She didn’t talk about salvation or sin, grace or atonement. She talked about being included. She talked about being loved. She talked about having a new family. Both of these people spoke from their heart and simply told their story and how their relationship with Christians made a difference in their lives, giving them hope. They were stories that inspired all of us. And I am confident that if they had shared their story with someone who was not a Christian there would be a good chance that they would have been moved and maybe even wishing that they could be a part of that kind of community as well.

The Holy Spirit is with us. We carry the Spirit in our bodies. And we all have stories to share of our own experiences of God. Likely those experiences manifested themselves through the presence and loving actions of others. I wouldn't be surprised that for some of you looking around in this room you see people who you have experienced God through. They were there for you when you needed support. They loved on you when you weren't always very lovable. They included you when you didn't feel like you fit in. All of our stories are different, they are personal, they are uniquely ours to tell. And with the Spirit in us we have all we need to tell our stories. So I challenge all of us to be ready to share our story with others. I'm not saying let's all rush out and walk up and down Fifth Avenue telling random people our experience of the mighty works of God. But we can be ready, when the time is right, to share our experiences, not with religious language but in ways that people can relate to. We can talk about how with God and with God's people we have experienced love, belonging, and hope. And I believe that when those opportunities come, as the Spirit prompts us, and we share from the heart, that those who hear our stories will be moved to ask the question, "Can I experience this love too?" And then we will have the joy by our words and actions to respond with a firm "Yes."