

**Date: Sunday May 23, 2010**

**Scripture: Acts 2:1-21**

**Title: “Speaking of the Spirit”**

**The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): The Spirit of God is upon the disciples in an upper room many years ago; it is upon us today.**

**The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): We will know what to say about God and when to say it thanks to the Spirit of God.**

**(Remember, it’s all about God!)**

A pastor was reading the story of Noah’s Ark out of a children’s Bible to a group of kids. After reading, he decided to ask a few questions about what had been read. “Who was the man with the big boat,” the pastor asked. One little girl responded, “Noah.” Then for some reason, the pastor asked, “What was the man with the big boat’s last name?” After a few seconds a little boy said, “It was Zark (Dyck).”

I share that today because I have a question about the passage from Acts that was read earlier. How did the earliest followers of Jesus spend the fifty days between Easter and the day of Pentecost, that time that we now call the Easter Season which has just concluded? Considering the story they had to tell, they seem to have been rather quiet. However, Jesus had ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there, together, for the Holy Spirit. But they’d had just let fifty days pass – fifty days - when they could have gotten word out that God had raised a man from the dead, the man they knew as their Lord, a man who had moved among them, had

spoken to them, and then was mysteriously and triumphantly taken up into heaven. They had so much to tell and so many people to tell. But what did they do? They gathered themselves together and went into an upstairs room to pray. I wonder why they weren't out in the streets of Jerusalem spreading the word.

Maybe part of the answer is that they knew they would have a bit of a public relations problem. Maybe they thought their account of God's mighty act of raising Jesus from the dead, vindicating the very person who had been crucified as a criminal, would be treated as "an idle tale" (Luke 24:11). They ran the risk of being beaten or jailed or run out of town. At a minimum, they'd be laughed at. They'd lose credibility. Perhaps they thought it was just better to stick together and stay quiet.

Whatever the reason, all this changed on the day of Pentecost. The time for silence was over. God's Spirit came rushing into the room where they were gathered with the force of a locomotive, banging the doors and rocking the chandeliers, loosening the tongues of all the people in that room. Suddenly they were telling the story that had changed their lives, and telling it so everyone, regardless of their language or ethnicity, could hear and understand. People were coming in off the streets of Jerusalem to hear what was being said. As the Spirit moved through that room, ordinary people became eloquent and fluent talking up a storm about what they had seen and heard. Even Peter, the one who had denied three times that he knew Jesus, went outside to preach to the crowd.

Yet in spite of the number of conversions that happened that day, and there

were many conversions, they did have that public relations problem. Some of the witnesses to this extraordinary scene were not captivated by it. They sneered, we read, and dismissed the apostles as drunks.

So the public relations problem of Christian believers is nothing new. Talking about religious faith, even when such talk isn't dangerous, as it was during the early period of the church, is at best unfashionable, considered in many circles to be in bad taste. Don't talk about religion or politics, right? And with good reason. Now no longer just conversations that can go bad fast, religious extremists are giving all of religious discourse a new, bad name. Political extremists do the same. All too often we hear political talk meshed with "religious" talk used to bash someone over the head and worse, to defame someone's character. It gets tiring and it is bad PR for Christianity.

Well, our Pentecost story is a different kind of "religious" talk. It is Spirit-driven speech. It is speech that draws people together rather than forcing them apart; speech that seeks to tell the truth rather than serving as an instrument of propaganda; speech that brings clarity to what was once obscure. The gift of the Spirit that was given to the church on that day of Pentecost was the power of proclamation. The Spirit that rushed into the midst of those early believers was the same Spirit who had anointed Jesus to stand up in the synagogue of Nazareth and preach these words:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight*

*to the blind, To let the oppressed go free, To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor"*  
(Luke 4:18).

The same Spirit anointing Jesus and loosening the tongues of a little band of timid disciples is the Spirit given to us, to make preachers and "proclaimers," of every one of us.

Yes, I said preachers of every one of us. Now I recognize that it is easy for me to stand up here and proclaim. I get to speak officially. When I get into the pulpit and open my mouth, you all expect to hear gospel-type talk. If I don't do that, I'm not doing my job.

But gospel speak is harder for most of you, and not because you need to go to seminary or some such thing in order to learn to talk this way. It's harder because the occasions on which you might be called to offer gospel talk or share your faith most probably will not be in church settings (Kenkeremath).

One of the questions I ask the students on the final exam in the Living Religions class I teach at State Fair is to name the main insight they have gained from the class. Then I ask them to share where and with whom they might share that insight. I get all kinds of responses. Some are broad as in "I'll share it with friends." Others are more specific as in, "I'll tell my neighbor who thinks they know everything about religion, but they really don't know that much."

Opportunities to share faith come in all sorts of places. It could be at a dinner party between the salad and the main course, when someone finds out you're a

church member and asks you why you are a Christian. It could be at the book store when someone notices you looking at books in the faith and religion section. It could be at Open Door when one of the clients asks, “What church do you attend?” Those places can be a lot harder to share about religion because you’re not prepared and you want to get it right; you want to say something that will be powerful, understandable, and believable. How do we talk about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, when such experiences are so often personal and indescribable?

That’s an important question because the cultural pressure against speaking about our Christian faith is probably stronger now than it has ever been since New Testament times but the importance of doing so in a world that needs the good news of God is probably stronger now than it ever has been.

I read this week that in the 1950’s *The New York Times* would publish the full text of sermons from all the major pulpits in New York City. What was said on Sunday morning was apparently considered important enough for society in general that the *Times* felt they needed to report it. I found that fact amazing. The language of proclamation was not confined to just church sanctuaries, but spilled out beyond the sanctuary walls, into the streets of the city, through the medium of the newspaper.

Well, for better or for worse, those days are gone. We can’t count on others, especially the media, to do our publicity for us anymore. Now it’s especially important that we know how to speak, because there’s a lot of stuff out there that doesn’t put the Christian faith in a very good light and that distorts the Christian

story - and so called Christians are responsible for a lot of that trouble. We need to be able to give an accounting of our faith because there are many people out there, in this age that is now described as post-Christian, who are desperate for the good news we have to share.

The disciples gathered on that first Pentecost Sunday knew that what God had done and was still doing in Jesus Christ was good news that everyone needed to hear. It was information that changed lives, starting with theirs. We are here today because of them. We are able to stand and confess the faith we share, as we will be doing in a few minutes, because those disciples, those ordinary men and women, were turned into apostles and sent out into the world by the Holy Spirit. “*We cannot keep from speaking* about what we have seen and heard,” Peter says later in the book of Acts (4:20). We are the beneficiaries of their bold proclamation.

There will come a moment, a situation when you will have to speak of what you know and believe about God. Maybe you will talk about a low point in your life, a time when you were really scared, and then you weren't anymore, because you *knew* that God was with you. Or maybe you'll talk about a time when you felt filled with an indescribable joy and you couldn't say why, you couldn't explain it at all, but you *knew* it had something to do with God. Or maybe you'll talk about some situation that looked absolutely hopeless, with no prospect of anything but angry words and bitter feelings, and then there was a breakthrough, a chance to make a new beginning, and you *knew* God was there, a forgiving presence (Kenkeremath).

Confidence, joy, peace, and grace: who wouldn't want to hear about these things? As I told a friend in an email this week, "I know that you'll know what to say and when to say it." That's what the Spirit of God did for the disciples on that Pentecost so long ago. That's what the Spirit of God is still doing for us. And that is very good news.

As we think and wonder about words and ideas that we might share with others concerning faith, I invite us to stand and share together our United Church of Christ Statement of Faith.

Offering: Now let us give for the good of God's church all around the world, church brought into being by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Dedication: Lord, we ask that you accept and bless the offering we make today and we hope for the outreach of this offering in the name of your Spirit. So we pray, Amen.

Benediction: Go forth with faith rekindled and filled with praise as God's mighty Spirit is among us and blesses us this day and all days. Amen and Amen.

Sources:

Dyck, Drew; "Let My People Laugh"; Thomas Nelson: Nashville, TN; 2009.

Kenkeremath, Lisa; Lectionary Homiletics; [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com); 2010.

Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.