

SERMON: What Does This Mean?

TEXT: Acts 2:1-21

A number of my pastor friends on Facebook were posting reminders to their church members to wear red today. Everybody knows – or every church-going body knows that you wear red on Pentecost. But what else do we know about this day? If you've been in the church all your life, you probably know that the Holy Spirit filled a crowd of believers on the first Pentecost, and thus the Christian religion was born. And you may remember that the spirit sounded like wind, and appeared as tongues of fire resting on each person in the crowd.

It's interesting to imagine what it must have been like to be there, and it's fun to decorate the church so that all can see the presence of the Spirit among us.

It's all very pleasant, and maybe even a little exciting if you're really into it. But I received two articles in my email this week. One was titled, *Pentecost is boring*, and the other, *Pentecost is revolutionary*. But the point of the first article was that Pentecost seems to have become boring, when what it *should be* is at least surprising, perhaps even revolutionary.

The theologian who called it revolutionary explained, “An in-breaking of the Holy Spirit means a great equalizing has happened. The world as we have known it gets turned upside down and inside out. Men and women, young and old, slave and free – the Spirit pours over all. The distinct languages and cultures of the whole world's peoples become the Word of the Lord. Direct communication of the divine deeds of power happens, no translation needed. Everyone is on a level playing field when it comes to the power and outpouring of the Holy Spirit. No wonder onlookers are amazed, perplexed, judgmental.” (Jill Duffield, *Pentecost is Revolutionary*, Looking Into the Lectionary, The Presbyterian Outlook, May 20, 2018)

Hearing the different languages all spoken at the same time was amazing, wasn't it? And perplexing. Confusing. Maybe even irritating or upsetting. It sounded like chaos. Even if you speak another language – even if you speak all five of those languages – you probably couldn't understand anything, with everyone talking all at once.

Furthermore, let's look again at those images of wind and fire. “At Pentecost there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind.” This is no ordinary, stiff breeze that messes up your hair or blows the hat off your head. It is a *violent* wind. Think straight line winds during a thunderstorm that can tear the roof off

your home. Think tornadoes that uproot trees, toss vehicles, and pick up houses. Think hurricanes where full grown men cannot even stand in one place without being blown over.

And those tongues of fire? I never really had a good image of that in my mind until the Kilauea volcano in Hawaii began erupting over two weeks ago, spewing fiery lava into the sky.

Then we hear the words Peter quotes from the prophet Joel: “And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood.”

There’s nothing boring or ordinary or even pleasant about any of this. It’s amazing and perplexing. In fact, it’s downright terrifying. The Spirit shakes us up. The Spirit wakes us up. Now, as it was then, the Spirit should make us pay attention. The Spirit should make us ask ourselves and one another, **WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?**

There is chaos in our country and in our world that is perplexing and terrifying. Extreme racism, where people call the police, and police arrest and

even shoot people for the color of their skin. Refugees fleeing war-torn and violent homelands seeking asylum in our country, only to be sent away or have their children taken away. World leaders, drunk with power, who play games with peoples' lives in a quest to build up themselves and their bankrolls. School shootings becoming so common that the children themselves have to protest, and still our legislators look the other way. An income gap which continues to grow larger; the rich become richer and the poor become poorer. Gender inequality, where women are still earning less than men for the same work. White supremacy. Sexism. Entitlement. Fake news. A deeply divided nation. And a church that is dying. Many people don't even view these issues as problems. Many people have already formed their opinions. Many people don't want to be bothered. THIS. IS. NOT. NORMAL. There is chaos and turmoil all around.

We need to be asking ourselves, WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? And not just in a passing, hopeless way, throwing up our hands and shaking our heads while we walk out the door and go on with our lives. The Spirit poured out on Pentecost continues to be poured out among us in order to shake us up and wake us up to come together and put our belief into action.

We need to let every voice be heard, and we need to listen – not to respond – but to understand. Maybe the church is declining because we're *not* doing anything, *not* responding to these issues, *not* speaking up, *not* listening to other voices, *not* waking up or being shaken up.

A Pentecost that is revolutionary should prompt and inspire radically new and innovative ways of being the church, of living out our beliefs, of working outside or beyond established procedures and principles.

Instead, says the author of that article, *“The church [has] traded the revolution of Pentecost for the comfort and complacency of silos of sameness. Pentecost becomes the day on the liturgical calendar to celebrate the birthday of the church instead of a day to remember that our entire world should be turned upside down and inside out when we commit to following Jesus Christ. Pentecost means that our circles of concern are expanded and multiplied. We are to be bi-lingual, tri-lingual, multi-lingual – always striving to speak more fluently and listen more closely until we come to a place where we know each other's languages so well we dream one another's dreams.*

After revolution comes the hard, time-consuming, slow work of building a new order: a new way of life together. That's true for Pentecost, too. A Spirit-constituted community, if it is to last and grow, requires work. Speaking another's language is challenging. Hearing someone speak a language they have not yet mastered calls for patience....Creating a new common vocabulary comes only with time and shared experience. The pull of the old, familiar categories, patterns and our own native language is strong. No wonder we'd rather sing "happy birthday," blow out the candles and go back to the same pew we've sat in for years. Spirit-community asks not just a lot of us, but everything we've got."

I think it is important to note again the words of Joel, describing the results of the Spirit's coming: "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy."

With the Spirit, comes prophetic teaching from young and old, male and female, slaves and free. Those who prophesy have been inspired to speak on

behalf of God, as a mediator between God and humankind. If God's word is being spoken by all these people, it seems as though we are called to listen.

On this revolutionary day, may we be open for the Spirit to wake us up and shake us up, and to bring all nations and races and religions together. Even in the chaos – especially in the chaos – as we wonder, WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?, may we be willing to listen and to seek understanding. May we call on the name of the Lord, and may we follow in revolutionary ways of Christ, our Savior... to the glory of God!

AMEN.