

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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Isaiah 56:1-8 (NRSV)

Thus says the Lord:

Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my deliverance be revealed.

[2] Happy is the mortal who does this,
the one who holds it fast,
who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it,
and refrains from doing any evil.

[3] Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,
"The Lord will surely separate me from his people";
and do not let the eunuch say,
"I am just a dry tree."

[4] For thus says the Lord:
To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,

[5] I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.

[6] And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,
and to be his servants,
all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant--

[7] these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.

[8] Thus says the Lord God,
 who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
 besides those already gathered.

Acts 2:1-21 (NRSV)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. [2] And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. [3] Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. [4] All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

[5] Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. [6] And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. [7] Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? [8] And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? [9] Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, [10] Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, [11] Cretans and Arabs--in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." [12] All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" [13] But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

[14] But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. [15] Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. [16] No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

[17] '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.

[18] Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
 in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
 and they shall prophesy.

[19] And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.
[20] The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.
[21] Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

MULTI-CULTURAL STEWARDSHIP

Were your ears burning last Saturday? They should have been. I was talking about you. More specifically I was speaking at a conference on multi-cultural ministry and using our church as an example of how that exotic ministry can occur in a garden variety church like ours.

Basically, I said that it was a matter of stewardship.

We believe that God has given us all that we have, and it is our job to share what he has entrusted to us with others. That includes our church building and our lives. I am proud of how you have been so willing to share all that you have with many different groups, and I think that it is a positive witness to the rest of the community.

But, did you know that sharing what we have with others is not just a good thing to do; it is at the heart of the gospel? The mission of the church is, at its heart, a mission of sharing. The mission of the church is sharing the gospel the good news of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ and sharing who we are and what we have with others.

Those two ways of sharing are bound together. There can be no sharing of the gospel unless we are also willing to share who we are and what we have with others.

Sharing with others is based upon the biblical belief that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." (See Psalm 24:1) All that we are and all that we have really belongs to God. We are merely stewards or caretakers of a portion of God's world.

If we truly believe that, it will affect how we treat the stranger who comes to live among us.

In fact, the test of our faith according to the early church is this test of sharing. Those filled with the Spirit are those who learn to speak a new language, the language of love and caring. And that language leads them to share what they have in some most remarkable ways.

For example, at the end of chapter two of the book of Acts we read that these new Christians sold what they had and distributed the proceeds to any who had need. (Acts 2:44-45) Instead of closing themselves to the rest of the world, the Spirit opened them up to a whole new world, a whole new way of living.

TWO COMPETING VIEWS OF GOD'S WILL

In Old Testament times there were two different ways of looking at faith. For some faith was a birthright. Israel was God's chosen people, and that meant everyone else was not chosen. The people of God would receive God's protection and blessing while the other nations of the world would not be so fortunate.

This often led to arrogant and self-serving decisions on the part of Israel's leaders. And often this kind of thinking often got the nation into trouble.

But, there was another, competing theology. There were those that believed that God did not choose Israel for special privilege. Instead, she was chosen for special service. Israel was not chosen to dominate other nations militarily. She was chosen to bring other nations a beacon of hope and invite them to participate in a new spiritual kingdom.

Our reading from Isaiah is an example of this second way of relating to the outsider. The prophet dreamed of a time when all would be welcomed into God's kingdom, when no one would be cut off from God's grace. Indeed, the temple would be known as a "house of prayer for all peoples".

The prophet specifically mentions two groups that were often despised in the ancient world, eunuchs and foreigners.

In a society where hope was often defined by being remembered by your children, eunuchs were without hope. They would have no children to remember them, and they were socially excluded on the basis of purity laws.

But, in this passage we see that God has decided change all that. The Lord said that they would not be excluded from God's people. If they would be faithful, God would give them a "monument and a name better than sons and daughters".

This was a very radical statement in the ancient world. And I suspect if we could hear it correctly, this would be a very radical statement in our world as well.

According to the prophet, God's grace is much wider than some would like to admit. Some would say God's grace is shockingly inclusive.

The only people despised more than eunuchs in the prophet's day were foreigners.

But, according to the prophet, foreigners shouldn't be excluded from the promises of God either. Instead of being a symbol of national power, the temple would become something more like the United Nations of faith. God's house would be a house for all people.

They would go beyond just tolerating the foreigner. They would welcome the foreigner with open arms as a sign of their affection for God. In Leviticus 19:34 we read, "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

Unfortunately, the more exclusive, nationalistic brand of theology won the day. Faith became a matter of separating yourself from the rest of the "unclean" world.

Faith was not about opening yourself up to love the stranger but about keeping the stranger at arm's length. Faith was about securing the borders

and making sure your daughter or son didn't marry someone from across that border.

THE JESUS REVIVAL

But, when Jesus came, he revived the more inclusive philosophy.

In fact when Jesus cleansed the temple, overturning the tables of the money lenders and driving out those who were selling sacrifices, (what we might call a kind of exorcism of an unjust religious system) he used these words of Isaiah as justification for his actions. He said, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." (Luke 19:46)

This vision of inclusiveness explains why Jesus was always breaking the purity laws of the day: touching lepers, eating with sinners and tax collectors, healing on the Sabbath and talking with women in public.

Jesus apparently felt that the call to reach out in love to the outsider trumped the obsession of the religious leaders to maintain ritual purity. He told his disciples that associating with the "wrong" people would not make them bad. Their character would be determined by their own actions and choices and not by the company they kept.

I think this is an empowering message in many ways.

I often talk with people who feel overwhelmed by circumstances. Things are going wrong in their life. People are doing things to them that make them miserable. And I tell them all the same thing.

"You cannot control the actions of others. You cannot make others behave the way you want them to behave.

But, you can do the right thing.

You can act in a way that is befitting a gospel of grace.

You can be gracious in an ungracious world, and by the power of God's Spirit, your actions will change things."

DRUNK?

We spend way too much time worrying about what others are saying and doing instead of opening ourselves to the winds of the Spirit. There was negative talk even on the day of Pentecost.

Did you notice what some people said about Peter and the other disciples as they proclaimed the gospel to people from all over the world by using a Spirit filled language?

These people are drunk. Don't listen to these crazy ideas.

Whoever heard of welcoming the outsider with open arms? Whoever heard of a language that everyone can speak? Everyone knows that God only speaks Hebrew!

Whoever heard of a religion that reaches out to everyone without regard to where they're from or what they've done?

That's crazy.

They must be drunk.

THE FULFILLMENT OF PROPHECY

And it was Peter who stepped up and answered their challenge. (Yes, this is that same Peter who had not so long ago denied his Lord with an oath.) But, now, empowered by the Spirit, he preached his first sermon to a hostile audience.

And in this first portion of the sermon that comprises our lesson for today, Peter said,

“These men aren't drunk.

It's only 9 AM and the bars aren't open yet.

No, what you see here is the fulfillment of prophecy.

This is the day spoken about by the prophet Joel, that grand and glorious day when everyone will be filled with God's Spirit. And God won't play favorites when it comes to his Spirit. Men and women, slaves and free, sons and daughters, young men and old men will all be filled with my Spirit. They will all prophesy in my name.

And, this will change the whole world forever. Heaven and earth will never be the same after this happens."

Peter's Spirit inspired message has proved to be true. The Spirits' flaming tongues not only enabled those first disciples to proclaim the gospel to a world wide audience; those flaming tongues also lit a fire that continues to burn even today. It is a message of God's love for all peoples.

GOD LOVES THE WHOLE WORLD

Do you believe that? Do you believe that the love of God is a message without borders? God's love is not limited to a certain country or a certain people or a certain language? Do you believe that what unites us in Christ Jesus is stronger than all those things that divide us?

That's the message of Pentecost. God in Christ loves the world, the whole wide world and not just the part of the world that is familiar to us. At Pentecost we learn that God is multilingual. God speaks Hebrew and Spanish and German and Swahili ... and oh yes, God even speaks English.

But, God doesn't have an official language or an official country or even an official religion. God is bigger than that.

We sometimes say that Pentecost was the birthday of the church, but I think that's too small a label for what happened. Pentecost marked a turning point in time.

The Prophet Joel's words are much more apropos. Joel talked about cosmic change, about the sun turning dark and the moon turning blood red.

Pentecost is not about the birth of yet another earthly institution like the church. Pentecost is about how God's Spirit brings people together from all over the world in surprising and miraculous ways.

Pentecost is about how the power of God can change people and religions and nations and even the whole world.

Pentecost is about a salvation for all who call upon the name of the Lord.

SPIRIT EMPOWERED COMMUNICATION

Now you might say that you'd have to be drunk to believe a thing like that. That's what people said on that first Pentecost Day.

Communication is one of the most difficult tasks that anyone faces. Sometimes I preach a sermon and someone will say something after the service that indicates they heard the very opposite of what I had intended to say!

Communication is a delicate art.

It is difficult to communicate with people who come from different parts of our own country much less with people who come from a place where they speak a different language.

How can we hope to communicate with foreign powers when we can't even talk with the person who lives across the street or the person who sits across from us at the dinner table?

There's another story about language in the Old Testament. Most of you know it. It's called the story of the Tower of Babel. It seems that the people decided that they would build a tower that would reach all the way to heaven.

And, according to the story, God punished these proud people by breaking down their communication, creating all the languages of the world. And because they could not communicate, they were scattered all over the face of the earth.

As one commentator put it, “Nations became icebergs, detached from the whole of human society, isolated by oceans of misunderstanding and distrust.”

But, Pentecost represents an overturning of the Tower of Babel. In a world ruled by misunderstanding God’s Spirit brought understanding. In a world ruled by self-interest and prejudice, God’s Spirit brought sharing and acceptance.

When I think about Babel and Pentecost in relation to our modern world, I am tempted to say that Babel is still in charge. I don’t see much in the world to give me hope that reconciliation will win the day. Religion has been co-opted in the struggle for national and ethnic superiority. Tolerance and love are in short supply. That which divides us seems much stronger than those things which unite us.

But, we who are followers of Christ have a different story to tell. We do not think that the babble that surrounds us will have the last word.

Instead, we stake our claim on the hope that comes from above. We still believe in Pentecost. We believe that God’s power to save is stronger than the power of men and women to destroy. We believe that God’s power to unite is stronger than the power of men and women to divide.

I have come to believe that communication, true and honest communication is always a kind of Spiritual gift. Communication is always a kind of miracle.

But, we who are children of Pentecost believe that miracles do happen. Christians believe that when the Holy Spirit is involved, language and geography are no barriers to the working of God’s will. Babel turned the world upside down, but Pentecost turned it right side up again.

SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE

When I spoke at the multi-cultural conference I reflected upon an experience Carrollyn and I had were visiting in this area and considering whether I was being called to be pastor of this church.

We took some time to explore the area and found ourselves at Florida Mall during the Christmas season when there were many visitors from all over the world. In fact, as we walked the pathways of that mall we began to notice that on that particular day, no one was speaking English.

People were speaking Spanish and German and languages we didn't even recognize, but no one was speaking English. It was odd to be in a place where no one "spoke our language." And, quite frankly, we were a bit uncomfortable with the situation.

I suspect our feelings were just a mild version of what people feel all the time when they come to this country as immigrants. It must be very frightening to leave all that is familiar and cross the border into a new land. How they must long for home and a place that is safe. How they must long for a people who understand their language.

Many of these people live among us. Many of these people worship with us. They work with us and for us. They pay taxes and raise families.

There's a discussion going on in our country about what we should do with "those people" who are crossing the border and coming into our country illegally.

Of course there are practical reasons that we should secure our country's borders. Out of fairness we should encourage legal immigration.

And we should create viable pathways to citizenship for those who find themselves in difficult situations that are not of their own doing.

Christians cannot join in the immigrant bashing that has taken over this country. We must speak the language of love as a witness to our faith.

We must recognize that the reasons people immigrate into this country illegally are complex and are often related to unjust economic systems in this country and abroad.

There are employers in this country who want to hire illegal aliens because they can abuse them and take advantage of them, knowing that they dare not come out of the shadows to challenge their unjust ways.

There is no question that many in our society break the biblical injunction to treat the foreigner in our midst with fairness and love, as if he or she were a citizen.

Christians are called to respond in a different way.

How do we respond to the opportunities and challenges presented to us by the immigrants in our midst?

First of all, I would agree with the evangelicals who say that there is no such thing as a value free decision. We make our decisions, personal and political on the basis of what we value most.

And as Christians we value the Word of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

And so the question becomes, “What did Jesus do and what did his Spirit empowered followers do when they encountered people from beyond the border?”

They preached the gospel of God’s love and forgiveness, and they cared for the stranger in their midst.

They shared what they had. They spoke a common language, the language of love.

We may not like that message. We might want some other message. But, as followers of Christ we sometimes have to do what Christ tells us to do and not what we want to do.

I like the way a priest from Chicago put it. He said,

“We in the church go back to the fact that we don’t have borders in the churches. The kingdom of God has lots of rooms for lots of people who we might not like or agree with, but Jesus invited them in.”

I think that same truth comes through most clearly when we take communion.

What do we say about the “joyful feast of the people of God”? People will come from East and West, North and South. And it’s not our table.

It’s the Lord’s Table, and it is He who invites all who trust him to share the feast that he has prepared. God help us welcome all his people to the table.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN