

**BEING CHRISTIAN AMONG MANY FAITHS:
THE POWER OF TESTIMONY**

Acts 1:1-13

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on May 11, 2008, the Seventh Sunday of Easter, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 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. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

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

We are in the fourth of a five part sermon series entitled “Being Christian Among Many Faiths.”

- In previous sermons, I have said that in God’s “sovereign freedom,” God may include in his ultimate care – or salvation – those who do not necessarily know or profess directly the name of Jesus Christ. I emphasize the word “may,” for such knowledge rests with God alone, not with us.¹
- In last week’s sermon, I shared with you a position known as “Christian humanism” in which we as Christians can affirm our faith in Christ as Lord and Savior while also affirming the world in which we live and allow each to speak to the other.²

Today I want to focus on “the power of testimony.”

Let us pray. *“Take Thou our minds, dear Lord; we humbly pray. Give us the mind of Christ, each passing day; Teach us to know the truth that sets us free; Grant us in all our thoughts to honor Thee. Amen.”*³

When you open the bulletin and see a sermon title such as “The Power of Testimony,” you might think the minister is going to implore you to pick either one person to whom to start witnessing or your own street corner in Alexandria from which to start preaching. I am sure sermons with this title have issued such commissions.

But I shall issue no such charge. Rather, today I am going to speak from the “underside” of this title – not so much about the power of “giving” testimony as the power of “receiving” it.

To prepare, I ask you to consider the source and nature of the testimony you have received.

- Who and what has led you to the degree of faith you have in Jesus Christ?
- Who and what have led you to come to this place – a medium sized Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia – this day?

¹ See Larry R. Hayward, “Other Sheep Not of This Fold,” 4/13/08 and “Re-hearing ‘The Way, The Truth, and The Life,’” 4/27/08, available at www.wpc-alex.org.

² See Larry R. Hayward, “Waiting in Athens,” 5/4/08, available at www.wpc-alex.org.

³ William H. Foulkes, “Take Thou Our Minds, Dear Lord,” written in 1918.

- Who and what have led you to come to Westminster Church for the first time or for nearly every week in which you are in town?

It is only when we understand the power of testimony we have received that we are able to give effective testimony to others.

I.

The story of Pentecost can help us answer the questions of who and what have led us to faith. This story is as simple as it is mysterious.

- Jesus has been raised from the dead.
- He has ascended into heaven.
- He has instructed his disciples to return to Jerusalem to await the Holy Spirit he has promised.
- The time is the Jewish Feast of Pentecost.
- When the disciples arrive in Jerusalem, they find the city filled with faithful Jews from many countries who have made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Nearly every language in the known world is represented, including Galilean spoken by the disciples.
- Luke describes what happens next: “While the disciples are gathered in a large house, suddenly from heaven there comes a sound like the rush of a violent wind [like the sound many of us heard at 1:35 p.m. Sunday as an earthquake rolled through Fairfax], and it fills the entire house where they are sitting. Divided tongues, [yellow and red] as [with flame], appear among them, and a tongue rests on each of them. All of them are filled with the Holy Spirit and begin to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gives them the ability.”
- The crowd is astonished: “Are not all those who are speaking Galileans? How is it that we hear, each of us in our own native language? In our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power? What does this mean?”

What makes the testimony of these early disciples so powerful is the multi-linguistic nature of it. The Spirit enables each disciple to speak in a language not his own, but a language understood by someone in the gathered crowd, each individual hearing in his or her native tongue.

II.

(a)

It is clear to me that what leads the *disciples* to the degree of faith they receive at Pentecost is the dramatic religious experience they have. Each disciple begins to speak and finds that he is speaking in a language not his own, but a language that someone in the crowd can hear and understand.

This religious experience gave birth to what is called Pentecostalism. It is a growing, powerful dynamic force in Christianity across the world and in America. Worship in this tradition is marked by speaking in tongues, an ecstatic religious experience not unlike that found in this account, though more akin to experiences described in I Corinthians 12-14. What gave these disciples their faith was this dramatic religious experience.

(b)

If the first half of the event shows what gives the *disciples* faith, the second half shows what leads the *crowd* to faith.

- Those in the crowd are Jewish.
- They don’t all speak the same language but they share the same faith and they have made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival of Pentecost.
- While in Jerusalem, they encounter people they have never seen before, but whose language they recognize as Galilean.

- Suddenly, these Galileans begin to speak in a language they in the crowd can understand. It seems that for language represented in the crowd, there is a Galilean able to speak in that tongue. Those in the crowd wonder what is happening.
- In a moment, they see one of the eleven stand and begin to speak.⁴
 - He speaks of Jesus of Nazareth.
 - He speaks of signs and wonders and power.
 - He speaks of Jesus' identity as God's Son and Messiah.
 - He speaks of death and resurrection.
 - So powerful is his speech – so clear is it in their own hearing – they are amazed and perplexed.
 - Some are turned off.
 - Some want to know more.
 - Some submit themselves to baptism and belief.

In contrast to the *disciples* who are speaking, what gives the *members of the crowd* the faith they have is their ability to hear in their own language the mighty acts of God. The crowd doesn't hear the sound the disciples hear. The crowd doesn't see the flames of fire. The crowd simply hears what the disciples are saying, in a language they can understand. That hearing leads some to belief.

To summarize then:

- The “what” that led the disciples to faith was a dramatic religious experience.
- The “what” that led members of the crowd to faith was hearing the gospel in a language they could understand.
- For both, the source of faith – the “who” – was the Holy Spirit. The Spirit gave some the ability to speak; it gave others the ability to hear. The “what” that led each group to faith differed; the “who” behind each “what” is the same – the Holy Spirit.

III.

What does this tell us as we envision our future, having completed the renovation of our facilities, is two-fold: It says first that the “what” that leads us to faith varies.

- Some of us in this room may have come to faith through a dramatic religious experience like that of the disciples.
 - It may have been at a church camp, a youth retreat, a confirmation event.
 - It may have been a revival meeting.
 - It may have been during an illness that brought us close to death, during the loss of a marriage, the illness of a child, the death of a spouse.
- Others of us in this room have come to faith because, like those in the crowd, we have heard the story of Christ in a way we understand.
 - Perhaps through a minister to whose preaching we could really relate
 - Perhaps through a book we read at a crucial turning point
 - Perhaps through a course in church or college
 - Perhaps through a teacher in church or school.

A 19th hymn evangelical hymn, written by anti-slavery British hymn writer A. Katherine Hankey, bears witness to this way of receiving the faith:

Tell me the old, old story
Of things unseen above,
Of Jesus and His glory,
Of Jesus and His love.
Tell me the story simply,
As to a little child,

⁴ The subsequent events happen in Acts 2:14-47.

For I am weak and weary,
And helpless and defiled.

Tell me the story slowly,
That I may take it in—
That wonderful redemption,
God's remedy for sin.
Tell me the story often,
For I forget so soon;
The early dew of morning
Has passed away at noon.

Tell me the story softly,
With earnest tones and grave;
Remember, I'm the sinner
Whom Jesus came to save.
Tell me the story always,
If you would really be
In any time of trouble,
A comforter to me.⁵

The story – told “simply,” told “slowly,” told “softly” – the way we came to faith.

IV.

Whether you became a Christian through a dramatic religious experience, or through hearing the story in a way that touched you, the source of the faith is the Spirit. The Spirit enables some to speak in tongues not their own, just as the Spirit enables others to hear in tongues familiar to them. The “what” of faith varies; the “who” is the same.

As I have said earlier in this series, we cannot know for sure whom God is calling to be his own. Such knowledge is beyond us. We can – as I do – hope and trust that God finds a way to extend to all the love we have known in Jesus Christ.

In the meantime, our task is to take the experiences we have received, whether through a dramatic religious event or through a hearing of the gospel from someone we could understand, and bear witness in our day and time. How we might do that at Westminster Church will be the subject of next week's final sermon in this series.

I invite you to return.

Amen.

⁵ A. Katherine Hankey, “Tell Me the Old, Old Story,” written in 1866.